Of Honor and Innocence

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Splinter has still not returned, and a murder in the sewers related to the mysterious Karai drags the turtles back into the world of the Foot. Sequel to What Cannot Be Fixed.

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Prologue: Stuggles of a Life

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Author's Note: This IS the sequel to What Cannot Be Fixed , so if you haven't read that then please back-peddle and do so before you move onto this, as you will be confused for the exposition and beginning sequences of this text. This story will have a lot more action and the presence of more characters than the turtles, unlike its predecessor. Let me just say that I despise making original characters, but the OC I'm creating is a necessity for the plot I wish to work with, and it is a dichotomy that's not coming out of nowhere. I have it here because, as always, I love to delve into characterization—and sometimes I need props. I am also writing this story assuming the chronology of the films but using character development seen in the 2003 cartoon series when it comes to Karai—i.e. the guys have just met her, do not yet know her relation to Shredder, etc. I'm using this to go back to basics on Karai, minus the alien stuff. And keep your eye out for other familiar characters! Please, please read and review, as feedback is always helpful and this story deals with action, which isn't my strongest area. And so you know, this story will, like the one before it, reference the *Raphael* movie prequel comic from the notes of writer director Kevin Munroe as part of the continuity of the TMNT film. I more or less summarized it in the epilogue of the last story, so you shouldn't be too lost. Enjoy!

Disclaimer: If I owned these turtles, I would not need scholarships. They are like my big brothers, and I give full credit to Eastman and Laird and all their little helpers along the way. I just borrow them.

Of Honor and Innocence

Raphael had typically viewed life with his brothers as a very long, sometimes boring, and particularly non-blood-spattered battle. Creating relationships to him meant a kind of struggle, and given the amount of fighting that permeated his life, he knew he couldn't be far from the truth.

It was a struggle with Michelangelo: they were both the younger brothers, and Mikey had always been the baby; that meant he got away with whatever the hell he wanted, including inciting his older brother to anger before promptly getting him into trouble. This necessitated a kind of larger struggle now that they had to relate to each other on an older plane, because how can one possibly see someone who spent so much time being the baby as an equal? This was the battle. But Michelangelo was indefatigable and Raphael was tough; they managed. It took being unconscious for several days to see his little brother act like an adult (in coming to his rescue, no less), but it happened. Perhaps grudgingly, but on some level Raphael supposed he liked it.

It was an even greater struggle with Donatello. They were very close in age, and could easily exchange roles given situation. At home, when Leo wasn't around, Donnie was in charge; if they had to go into battle without the eldest, Raphael would take the lead. One would think a kind of passing the baton, a kind of healthy, communicative partnership existed in this, but quite the opposite was true—they spent a year and a half doing little else but yelling at one another or saying nothing at all. But Donatello was patient, and Raphael was tough; they managed. It took Donatello very nearly killing Raphael and quite a bit of compromise to do this, but it happened. They were two very different people; had they not been brothers, they were not the type to be friends. But there was a sense of completion in this—a good fit. Raphael found comfort in his brother's stolid scholarship; Donatello found comfort in Raphael's slate-faced belligerence that promised to protect him, no matter what the threat.

Life with Leonardo—and life dealing with his absence—was the war of Raphael's life. Battles with his other brothers only served to prepare him for what he found in his eldest brother. He knew that if he had an afterlife, and if it was anything like *No Exit* or *On a Pale Horse* or anything else equally morbid that Raphael enjoyed filling his head with, it would be locked in a room with Leonardo for all eternity, dealing with a conflict that could never be resolved. It was ancient. It was primordial, their war, sometimes almost Cain and Abel in nature, and not because they were polar opposites, foils, or anything else so dramatic. Raphael had never understood before his sixteenth year, but knew now, and it was his first step down the long road of a consciousness he had not before known. Leonardo was himself. They were brothers, angry, and mirrors of one another's conflicts. Such a thing could never resolve itself, because neither could truly accept what they saw in that cracked, distorted funhouse mirror. Perhaps it was only cracked when Leonardo looked; Raphael knew that if one side had to be the more twisted, it lay with him. He found himself feeling a kind of fury that his brother had to look into that reflection and see such a profound darkness, to see the spider web that led often back to him, the brotherly partnership through the unilluminated tracks and turns of the city above. Harlem above. He found himself trapped on this road in an unlikely pairing, handcuffed to the person he hated most in world. Leonardo. Himself.

Raphael sat and looked around at the crowded warehouse where he and his best friend Casey kept shop. It was meditative, very different from where his brothers would choose to find inner peace, yet fundamentally the same. It was dark, and dirty, and quiet. It held a bunch of objects that people needed in some form or another, in this case to move around; they were things that Raphael could touch, and change, and fix, and control, and give back, good as new. He could polish them, make them beautiful, take pride in his work. He could get covered in axle grease and learn even more about classic bikes, and feel Mikey's eyes on him, thinking he was the coolest thing since sliced pizza. Being cool is a necessity for an older brother who doesn't have the luxury of being the eldest. If that included

acting like he didn't give a flying rat's ass about anyone when he really worried about his family 24/7, then that was the price of cool.

He looked at the still bike in front of him—the Nightwatcher bike, which he had gained from a man named David Merryweather, now dead to the violence of Harlem. It seemed his life too had ground to a halt, with only his brothers and the day-to-day—like so many other people, he supposed—to give it meaning. Raphael remembered when his life had been so before he had ever heard of April O'Neil, of the Foot, of the Shredder, or triceratons or utroms or Max Winters. He had been fourteen then, and he had never known what it was to be one with his brothers, to help people, to do right. Now he knew it all, and he missed it. But such was being—for the most part—normal. Except normal people don't have to remember the experience of being heroes.

Yet Leo said he could feel something coming, something uneasy, something under his skin, a creeping sensation of suspicion, that all was too quiet. Leo had the restlessness of the traveled in him; his life had made him a gypsy. Raphael understood this feeling; his life as a vigilante had half-infused him with the vagabond, afraid to return to an empty home. And while their brothers appeared content, both had the itch in their veins; Donatello stared at his screens a bit too wishfully, and Michelangelo scoured the news, hoping for some hint that something called for them, called for the atom to become whole again, for their individual lives to fuse once more. Leo could feel it coming. Raphael felt only the empty warehouse, focused insanely on the task at hand.

The sirens just outside were too seductive. They were his dark siren song, the thrum of his pulse.

A Sharpened Shadow

"That was SO not a win—you cheated by getting April to distract me, dude! Best seven out of ten!"

Michelangelo's shouting voice was the first Raphael heard as he returned to the den from the shop for dinner. Raph craned his neck to look at the arcade consoles, and found his little brother and his best friend, Casey Jones, playing Mortal Kombat rather ferociously and, like the large children they were, fighting about the winner of the last match. He chuckled.

"Aw, how cute. That brain transplant you got finally put you equal to Mikey's maturity level, Casey."

Casey whirled, his hands still on the joystick and the A-button. "Hey, freak-face! How's the shop this lovely evening?"

Raph grunted and went towards his notebook; he was slightly disturbed to find Leo smiling at him as though he knew something he didn't know from the kitchen table.

"It's… fine. You stayin' for dinner?"

"I dunno—hey, April, we stayin' for dinner?" Casey shouted towards Donnie's alcove.

April came out with Donatello behind her, his headset still on. He seemed to be on the line, further evidenced by the C++ handbook April had in her hands to help him with a difficult customer. She smiled broadly to see Raphael.

"Raph, there you are! I wanted to come up and get you, but Leo said you needed alone time with that bike of yours. Have the pair of you decided to tie the knot?" she teased, hugging him.

Raphael laughed. "I could get you back *so* much worse, considerin' you're goin' out with *that* over there." He gestured at Casey, who was coming up behind him; Mikey remained on Mortal Kombat, playing against the computer. "But I won't. What kinda pizza you guys want?"

Casey, very intelligently, gestured at April to make the decision for them, and went to sit at the kitchen table with Leo.

"He's wisin' up, I see," Raph commented, making April laugh.

"Please, Raph—as though you know any more about relationships than him. You probably get in lover's quarrels with your motorcycle more than they do," Leo smirked, making Raph punch his arm. "You want to share a Veggie Lovers with me?"

"Can we put pepperoni on it?" Raph asked, writing it down.

Leo rolled his eyes. "I think that defeats the point, but sure."

Donnie was pacing in the den, gesturing at April to keep up with him on the C++ manual. "Yes—no—well, I'd have to look up that particular protocol. Would you like to give me a call-back number so I can research this further? It sounds like your programmer mixed up the code on your primary platform…. Yes—thank you—you, too. I'll be sure to get back to you within the hour." He ripped off the headset and sighed. "Phew, what a nightmare. This guy's programmer must be some kind of mentally handicapped atavistic ape. Or else a seven-year-old." He smiled at April, then at Raph. "Thanks for the help. I miss having you around helping me crack codes and what-not. Taking pizza orders, little brother?"

Raph raised the notebook in response.

"I'll share a Wednesday with Mikey," Donnie decided. "Wednesday okay with you, Mikey?"

Michelangelo, distracted by the game, just waved a hand. "Yeah, sure, Wednesday's good."

"April?"

"A Meat Lover's. Casey's a growing boy—needs all the protein he can get for his trick-or-treating," she said with a combination of sweetness and nastiness that made Donatello grin and Raphael cough to cover up a laugh at his friend's expense.

Raph placed the order and threw himself into a chair. "So, to what do we turtles owe the pleasure, guys? Any occult antiques we should be worried about? Purple Dragons up to somethin'? Foot ninjas knockin' on your door and evangelizin'?"

Mikey bounded over. "Ooh, Foot ninjas? Where? I wanna kick some Foot ninja butt!"

Donnie, standing behind Leo's chair, clapped Mikey on the shoulder. "Relax, little brother—no butt-kicking just yet."

April sat down in the remaining chair, so they were now congregated around the table; their group of six made Splinter's absence all the more glaring; April and Casey were careful to say nothing of his nonattendance. April nervously put her hands together.

"Well, actually, we came to—well, this is so hard—it's just that"—

Casey tried to intervene for her. "Maybe I should, April… we came to tell you guys that she—I mean, I—I mean, we"—

Leonardo's annoying, ever-knowing smile got wider, as he sat there with his arms crossed. Donatello seemed to have gotten it, too, and his eyes got big.

"Oh my God…"

"What? What's wrong? What happened?" Mikey said, anxious and oblivious. Raphael sat very still, very silent, very tense, tight-lipped.

"Mikey, don't you see?" Donnie asked him, rhetorically; he too was grinning just as Leo was. Mikey, however, did not "see."

"No! Is it the Foot? Why won't someone just tell me what's goin' on?"

April had begun laughing, as had Casey, their nervousness vanishing.

"No, Mikey—it's not the Foot. Nothing's wrong! It's just that"—

"You're getting married," Raphael said, soberly. His arms were crossed, and he stood. Michelangelo looked shocked; his jaw dropped.

"What—no way! That's—whoa, that's even more dangerous than the Foot! This is gonna be fun, dudes!"

Casey's eyes were following Raphael. "Raph—somethin' wrong?"

Raph turned; he held his arms out wide. "No—I'm happy for you guys, don't get me wrong. I *really* am. I'm just… it's just that we can't be there. And neither can Splinter. He might not… he might not ever even know about it…" He blinked, avoiding their stares.

April stood, watching him with gentle eyes and a smile. "That's the other thing we wanted to tell you. We wanted… well, we wanted to have it down here. With all of you. We'd have a small ceremony at the court, of course. But the real thing would be here. If that was okay with you."

Mikey made a whooping sound. "Alright—pizza reception, dudes!"

Raphael shook his head firmly. "No. You… ya can't have your weddin' in the *sewers* . I mean, you should be married somewhere… beautiful, April… I mean, you wouldn't have bridesmaids or a flower girl, or a maid of honor. You couldn't have your family there…"

"You guys *are* my family. And you're the ones I want to be at my wedding," April said, equally as firm, yet still gentle. Raph could see,

on the other side of her, Donnie had tears in his eyes, and Mikey had turned very serious, looking very moved. Leo continued to smile warmly, as though he had predicted this entire conversation beforehand.

Casey stood, and took a deep breath. "Look, Raph—this is important for us, especially because—well, you know… I wanted to ask *you* to be my best man."

Raphael—big, tough Raphael, who in his life had seen himself as many things, none of them being a best man, in a wedding—stilled at this, his eyes the size of saucers.

"M-me? But— *me* ?"

Casey chuckled. "Well, yeah, man. You're kinda my best friend—and you're sorta my hero. As much as a giant turtle in a metal costume who hangs bad guys from telephone poles can be a guy's hero. And besides—I can count on you to give the most embarrassing toast, right?"

Raph swallowed, and found himself smiling involuntarily. His voice came out hoarse. "It'd be a serious honor. But I don't know if you should be lookin' forward to the toast that I would give—April's like my sister, man. I can use that opportunity to make my final threats."

Leo broke into laughter, and both Donnie and Mikey jumped into the air, shouting. April grinned and ran forward to hug Raphael, who froze before hesitantly hugging her back. She whispered in his ear.

"We'll wait until Splinter comes back—so don't worry yourself, okay? Everything will be fine. I'm just so glad we'll have you to help us."

Raph tightened his hug. "I'll do my best. This stuff isn't my strong suit."

Mikey came forward, pushing Donnie in front of him.

"Hey, babe—look what I found for you! It's a bridesmaid!"

April broke the hug, laughing. Raph reaching forward and grabbed Mikey by the shell.

"And look what else—a flower girl! Whaddaya know? They come in packs."

Donnie laughed, enjoying the revenge. "And Leo can be matron of honor!"

All three younger brothers laughed until Leonardo stood.

"Yeah, I'm sure we'd all look good in—what was the color again, April? Lilac? Periwinkle? It'd go great with the green skin, seeing as we're all Springs."

Casey was chuckling. "I think this is definitely a good indicator that we shouldn't bring alcohol to the reception, April—they're crazy enough as it is." He slapped Raphael's shell. "Maybe a flask of whiskey for Raph, though."

April looked offended. "Casey—he's sixteen!"

"Yeah, besides—Raph'd be the angriest drunk there ever was!" Mikey scoffed, making Leo and Donnie nearly cry with laughter. Such happiness was infectious.

Leo came forward and put an arm around Casey's shoulders. "Uh… I know it's your wedding and everything, but I'm gonna have to ask you *not* to get my little brothers drunk. They're hard enough to handle as it is."

Raph held up a mitigating hand. "Hey—I dealt with enough stupid boozers up in the city. I got no plans becomin' one of 'em, bro." He looked at April. "I promise we'll get you some kinda bridesmaid or flower girl—even if Donnie has to build you one, or we have to dress Mikey in a hula skirt."

April laughed. "That's okay, Raph—I'd rather not have to see that. Really. But if Mikey wants to come as Cowabunga Carl"—

Mikey struck is fist into the air. "Personal appearance! My best one ever, dudes! Way better than bar mitzvahs."

"Hopefully you won't have nightmares about this one," Donnie said.

After Raph and Leo left and came back, pizzas in tow, the six of them sat down around the table—one large family, with only a single glaring absence; in all the warmth, still that chill sense of incompleteness that even the greatest blessings could not dispel. Raphael sat next to Leonardo as their brothers joked with the engaged. The two of them exchanged glances, feeling on them the weight of Splinter's lack among them, save in that voice which sounded like him in the back of their minds. Perhaps it was the not knowing that made it worse. Raphael's looks told Leo that this was how he must have felt, for those many months, when they didn't know what had become of him; that Raphael was used to this; that it pursued him, this series of absences, prognosticating imminent death, even if he was wrong. So his brother would return to the motorcycles, to the shop, to the silence, and himself to training. Obsessive avoidance, along parallel tracks. Leo smiled at Raph, telling him he was there, stopping on the same points, finding pause even through the happiness. The light only further sharpened that shadow.

In Cold Blood

Leonardo was on the warpath the next few mornings, having his three brothers out of their bunks just after dawn to clean the den from top to bottom and get out into the sewers for training runs; by the time he had them up, it was obvious he'd already been training for an hour, and already had breakfast ready—the only thing he knew of to get his brothers into wakefulness without a sure mutiny. This situation forced Raphael to give up on sleeping after he'd returned from the shop at four or five AM, and instead sleep after Leo had them train. By the third morning he was joining Leo in his initial training and in cooking breakfast—this line-up made it all the easier to drag Mikey forcibly from his bunk by either leg, and then waft coffee fumes towards Donatello until he drifted out from under his blankets, as though he were a zombie, with a happy, sleepy smile. Leo felt glad that Raphael made this switch quietly and humbly—acceptingly, which showed that he was secretly not unhappy to spend the mornings with him, after Leo spent the nights assisting him in the shop; they made this exchange in silent, respectful complicity, then spent the afternoons sleeping.

After a week and a half of this schedule, the four brothers finished up around ten AM after a particularly harsh routine Leo had cooked up near the subway tunnels, where things became infinitely more complicated, as early morning subway traffic and the risk of being seen made them ever more on their guard, with the very real threat of being run over adding to the danger. They started home chilled with sweat and wishing fervently for showers.

"Man—I'm tellin' you, those donut places are making me crazy, dudes," Mikey grumbled, looking up through a grating at the busy downtown streets above them. They had run rather far in these runs, and foot traffic above in downtown Manhattan wafted several appetizing scents down to them.

"We did expend a lot of calories," Donnie said, stretching and massaging his shoulder, which had a tendency of popping out of joint ever since their first fight with Shredder. "Our glycogen levels are most likely very low. I'm sure some simple sugars would do us good."

Leo chuckled. "Showers first. Then Mikey can throw on his costume and do a donut run."

Raph, who was walking in front, held out a hand to stop them. "Shut up a minute. You guys hear that?"

Donnie and Leo stopped and listened; Mikey, however, continued sniffing at the grates. After a moment, Donnie shrugged.

"Sorry, Raph—I don't hear anything. If I had my auditory-enhancement gear, maybe"—

"Shh—No, I think he's right," Leo said, taking a step towards Raphael. Raph, however, was already looking around the next corner and squinting toward the next spot of light from the world above, several yards down the passage.

"Raph—wait!" Leo hissed, but was promptly ignored. Raphael went ahead in silence, intent on what he saw, forcing his brother to follow.

Donnie lagged behind, as Mikey dropped from the grid. "Man, those donuts smell good. What's everyone bein' so quiet for?"

"C'mon, Mikey. Raph and Leo are having a shared hallucination."

"Oh, okay," Mikey said amiably. "Does it involve donuts?"

"Is food really the only thing you ever think about when there aren't Foot ninjas five feet away?"

They turned the corner and came upon Leonardo, who stopped them dead in their tracks with an abruptly outstretched arm. He was watching Raphael intensely, who was walking away from them a

good twenty-five feet ahead. Donnie and Mikey squinted; Raph seemed to be moving towards a bundle of rags or trash against the sewer wall; there was an odd, squeaking sound echoing down the tunnels on either side, almost unnoticeable alongside the scurrying of rats and long, reverberating drips from above. Leo led them forward, cautiously, at a slower pace.

Raphael crouched a couple feet in front of the bundle, showing some intimation that he knew what it was; what confused Mikey and Donnie most was when he started talking to it.

"Hey—hey, what're you doin' down here?" Raph asked the pile of rags. "Shouldn't you be at school? Are you hidin' from somethin'?"

At that moment the pile of rags moved, and very suddenly, sending Raphael back a few steps, and making Leonardo spring forward, Donnie and Mikey in tow; they stopped ten feet from their brother, watching as the pile of rags threatened Raphael with a large stick, and his face as he tried very hard to appeared scared. Raph lifted his arms, as in surrender, not bothering to draw his weapons.

"Whoa, whoa—hey, ya got me," he said to the pile, peaceably—a strange tone of voice coming from him.

Leo cocked his head to one side—the pile had a face, that of a little girl behind several layers of dirt, and a mane of hair, that had probably been auburn or bright red at some point. She was perhaps nine or ten, malnourished, very small, and dressed like someone who had been homeless for a very, very long time. She had dark, fixed eyes, staring at Raphael like a feral animal; her stick had several nails jutting out from it—far more than a randomly chosen weapon.

"I'm not gonna hurt ya, I promise. I just… wanted to make sure you were okay," Raph continued, placating.

The little girl did not see it that way, however; she swung the stick at Raph's head, which he ducked, in a rather exaggerated movement;

the same thing happened when she swung at his arm. He used this action to turn around, allowing her to knock against his shell; he then acted like she'd hit a gong, and shook until he fell on the ground, watching her stealthily. As though she couldn't help it, the child cracked a small smile, creasing the dirt on her face.

"Aw, ya got me!" Raph cried theatrically.

Leo had his eye on something further down the tunnel, and went back the way they had come quietly, with Donatello behind him, to go investigate from the other side. Mikey took the girl's smile as an invitation to come forward and start making faces, while helping his brother up.

"This kid's scary, Raphi. I don't know if two little turtles like us are up to the challenge!"

The little girl hid her amusement and continued to brandish her stick, as if in warning; she watched them avidly, however, and as Raphael approached, she slowly let it down, never releasing him from that icy, focused stare.

"Look, we're not aliens or anythin'. We're just turtles, 'cept we're smart. Well, all of us except Mikey here," Raph said, smiling at her. "My name's Raphael, and this is my little brother Michelangelo, but we just call him Mikey."

"And we just call *him* Raphi," Mikey clowned.

"My other two brothers are around here somewhere—they're older than the two of us. They're Leonardo and Donatello—Leo and Donnie for short. They're both really nice and they can take care of any bad kinda situations, if you're scared of somethin'."

The girl finally spoke; she had a hoarse voice from disuse.

"I'm not scared of nothin'."

Raph and Mikey exchanged looks.

"What's *your* name, dudette?" Mikey tried asking, but the little girl had said her fill for the day. She merely shook her head.

"Uh… guys?" came Donnie's voice from twenty feet up the tunnel, in another dark patch. He and Leo came forward into a spot of light, holding the dragon kanji of the Foot clan, etched into a small black medallion on a long, red band. Mikey looked past them, but, unable to see, walked to where they had discovered it, only after Donnie tried to stop him.

"No—little brother, I don't know if you should see"—

"Bite me, dude," Mikey said, almost forcefully, and moved towards the second bundle on the passage floor. Raphael could guess from where he was; he felt both his own and Michelangelo's despair, as a stain of crimson was moving closer to the patch of light where their brothers now stood, looking at the little girl sadly, but also with an air of calculation. When Michelangelo turned around, it seemed something strange and vital had changed around his features; he seemed restless and at a total loss as to how to deal with what he'd just seen. The little girl kept her insane focus on Raphael, who stayed, considering her.

"That was your mom, huh?" he asked her, in his quiet, gruff voice. She nodded, almost imperceptibly. "And you hid yourself like a pile of trash so that the people chasing you two wouldn't know you were here?" Again she nodded. "And they've been after you for a while? You haven't been able to go up to the real world for a long time." This didn't require answering; both he and the little girl knew it to be true. When Raph spoke again, it was a whisper, resolute and determined. "Okay. Come on." He reached down, and picked her up; she was as light as a five-year-old, and didn't resist. "I'm not gonna take your stick, I promise."

" *Raphael* . What are you doing?" Leo said, warningly. Mikey pushed past him again.

"Taking her with us, of course!" Mikey answered for him. "She can't go back up top—those crazies *murdered* her *mom* , dude!"

"Well, she's not a puppy! We can't just take her home and keep her! She's a human—she should be at school!" Donnie implored. "We have to call someone and figure out what the protocol is for something like this."

Raph looked at him, his eyes flashing in the dark. "Oh, yeah? I'm not arguin' with ya, but in the meantime, she needs food and a bath, and somewhere safe—away from *that* and *all this* ." He used "that" and "all this" to mean her murdered mother and the squalor of the downtown sewer they walked through, then continued down the passage without further comment. His words weren't a logic his brothers could argue with, so they followed. Mikey was close on his heels, staying in protective proximity to the girl. Donatello and Leonardo took the opposite track, staying as far away from her as possible, as though she were a time bomb waiting to explode in their faces, exchanging foreboding looks. She, however, continued to look fixedly at Raphael, as though she were completely unable to look away; something behind her eyes was sad and empty—broken, and only her focus allowed her to keep breathing.

The little girl submitted to a bath but not to food; afterward, she sat in a small, very quiet ball of clean clothing beside Raph on the couch, looking ahead, and sometimes glancing at the other turtles, with the looks of a trapped animal. She had put her stick down, but if Raphael and Michelangelo moved too far away, she took it up again.

"How old are you?" Donatello tried asking, but received no response.

"I know!" Mikey said, sitting on the floor. "She's about eight. Probably younger."

The girl, appearing somewhat offended, looked over the couch arm at him. "I'm *ten* ."

Mikey pointed. "Oooh—made you *taaaalk* ."

She folded her arms obstinately, so Raphael chimed up.

"Well, I ain't gonna breach protocol and ask ya your real name, so we'll come up with somethin' to call ya. We've all got the names of Renaissance guys—maybe we can find you somethin' along the same lines. For fun, ya know? How 'bout it, Donnie?"

The little girl gave Raph a steely-faced thumbs-up, and Donatello came forward with one of Master Splinter's books.

"Hmmm… how 'bout Ophelia? She was the female lead in a Renaissance play."

"Naw—no good nicknames," Mikey responded.

"Beatrice? She was Dante's guide in heaven in *Paradiso* and the lead of *Much Ado About Nothing,* " Leo suggested, looking over Donnie's shoulder at the book.

"Too old lady," Mikey said.

"Ummm… there's Elizabeth, queen of Renaissance England…" Donnie brought up.

Raph watched the little girl. "Lizzie for short."

She thought for a moment, then gave a double thumbs-up.

"We gotta winner, guys," Raph proclaimed. "Lizzie it is."

"Great," Leo said, clapping his hands together. "Now that we have a code name, we're calling April."

Raph riled. "C'mon, Leo—couldn't we let her rest for just a night before we call in the cavalry?"

" *You* are already getting attached. So no," Leo responded tersely, and picked up the pay phone.

Raph sighed, frustrated, and looked at Lizzie, who was back to watching him intensely. "You don't wanna tell us why they were after you?"

She sat, tight-lipped, but tapped her head, as though the reason was there. Raph nodded; she more or less spoke his language, her nail-stick nearby.

"Speak softly and carry a big stick," he muttered, quoting Teddy Roosevelt, and Lizzie saluted him with a slate face in affirmation.

In Concert

Leo did a double-take and run when Donatello returned carrying several bad-smelling syringes of samples from the body for analysis; he was puzzling over a swab as he walked into the den, which had a strange, purple fluid on it.

"Would it be too much to ask for you to transfer to vials before you came back?" Leo asked from under the stairs, the furthest possible spot from Donnie's needles. "You're making me sick."

Donnie ignored him, and continued to scratch his head over the tiny swab. "I got this off the body—wait… Raph's got the girl somewhere else at the moment, right?" He looked around for the first time. Raph, Mikey, and the little girl couldn't be found in any inconvenient corners, so he put down the samples in his alcove. "It's a pretty simple diagnosis, really. They tried some kind of poison first; when she kept going, they switched to shuriken, and finally a katana. A well-made one, from the quality of the cuts, and very precise. Better than your typical Foot ninja. Probably someone elite—so we can figure Karai authorized it. Or it's a rogue."

Leo came closer now that Donnie held only the swab. "What kind of poison? That doesn't seem like Karai's style."

Donnie raised an eyebrow ridge skeptically. "You met her for about 3.5 seconds, and for most of that we were doing battle. What do you know about her style? This dead woman was just some homeless lady with a ten-year-old daughter, and Karai would've had her assassinated in cold blood. She could've even done it herself, judging from the skill."

Leo shook his head, troubled. "I don't know, Donnie. She showed a commendable level of honor, especially for a retainer of the Shredder." He sniffed, as Donnie held the swab. "Wait a second… I've smelled that before."

Donnie handed him the purple liquid on his cotton swab. "Be careful with it—your skin is more porous than a human's; you could absorb it into your bloodstream. Do you remember where?"

"No—I just remember berries that smelled like this. During my trip."

Donnie squinted at the juice. "It must be some sort of plant poison. I'll run a diagnostic for nitrates and alkaloids." He then disappeared into his alcove; the chem set bubbled and boiled into life. Leo shook his head, then moved towards the training room, where a chink of light shown between the door and the wall, and the sound of training ensued. He spied through the chink, but almost gave himself away by laughing.

Raphael had taken the stick away from "Lizzie" and replaced it with a shinaii; she still didn't seem to be speaking, but was very glad to square off with him. Both he and Mikey had the wooden practice swords Leonardo had started on once they'd specialized weapons; the bamboo shinaiis were something they'd all used, in the early days of their training, to teach them how to use weapons like an extension of themselves and learn the footwork. Leo smiled to see the little girl, dressed in several layers of mismatched clothing, holding the big shinaii with those big, bright, determined eyes. Mikey was sitting down, leaning on the practice sword and watching Raph give a lesson.

"Okay—that was good, but you gotta remember that you're protectin' your torso *first* —so if you lift the sword up like that after a hit, you're leavin' yourself wide open for a fatal strike. Keep the weapon aligned with the middle of your body."

Lizzie swung up toward Raph's head, and he blocked easily.

"Hey—that would be a good move, if we were the same height. But remember, you gotta advantage—you can swing at the legs, 'cause a' your height, and it'll be harder for me to block," Raph said, helpfully; in response, Lizzie, raising an intrigued eyebrow, swung down and brought his leg out from under him. Raph fell on his shell,

lying like an entrée in a shallow bowl. Mikey howled with laughter, and after a moment, Lizzie giggled.

"Like that?" she asked cheekily.

Raph shook a finger at her, chuckling. "Okay—I'll hand it to ya, that was really good. Now how about helpin' Raphi up, huh?"

She did as she was told, and lifted her shinaii again, a willing student. Mikey pounded the butt of his practice sword into the ground.

"Whoa, Raphi—I think Lizzie's wearin' you out, huh big bro?"

Leo felt his smile extend, knowing that they couldn't see him; his brothers could be real softies when they didn't have to be tough or be clowns. He felt Donnie come up behind him and tap his shoulder, waving the swab.

"Hey—I got it! Come see!" Donnie said, with the excitement of someone who believes the explosions in his lab are the only earthquakes on earth. Leo followed him calmly, with one last look into the training room.

Donnie stood aside to let Leo look in his microscope; Leo, however, stared at it doubtfully before scowling.

"Donnie—I have no idea what I'm looking at!"

Donatello wafted it under his nose, moving around excitedly. "It's a mixture—from the berries of the wild cherry and belladonna! That's why you've smelled it—numerous tribal groups around the world use berries from the nightshade family, like belladonna, in rituals, because it dilates the pupils when applied topically! When ingested, the belladonna berries release atropine into the system, which can cause paralysis. And wild cherry contains cyanide!" He said all of this very excitedly, as though he were describing Disneyland. Leo, on the

other hand, felt vaguely sick, the smell from the vials of decaying body fluids taken from the corpse didn't help matters.

"Yeah, okay, great—how was she capable of keeping going long enough that they thought a katana was necessary?"

Donnie held up a hand. " *That* 's the amazing part! I think I've obtained from the body a number of mutated lymphocytes—a kind of radiation-induced transformation on a small scale not unlike our own, but controlled and targeted! Her immune system fought the poison and stopped it from attacking the central nervous! Isn't it amazing?"

Leo held up his hands, attempting to calm him. "Don—then where did the mutation come from? All of the ooze was disposed of, and the only other mutants aside from us were a bunch of incinerated dandelions and Shredder, who's dead. Who could control the reaction like this, and why would the Foot want to destroy the result?"

"They *could* be working for someone—but that's your department," Donnie said hurriedly. "I need samples from the girl, to see if they'd be after her as well."

"You know, it might be just a hunch, but I don't think Raph and Mikey will let you anywhere near her with a syringe anytime soon. Sorry."

Donnie glanced around. "Maybe *you* should talk to Raph about that."

Leo scoffed. "No way. I'm not pissing him off while he's carrying that stick-totting little kid around. When he's feeling protective, heads roll. Have Mikey help you. I'll take Raph out for one-on-one training—he's overdue."

Donnie smiled, recognizing this indirect help, and his older brother's roundabout way of avoiding watching him use the needle. Leo clapped him on the shoulder.

"April should be here tonight with some research on the kid and what we should do about her. She said something about foster services, though she hasn't made a report. It's gonna break our little brothers' hearts." He moved back to spy on the practice room, leaving Donnie to thrill over dead parts and poisons in his dark alcove.

This time, Michelangelo was squaring off with Lizzie, and he was a fair match given they had about the same speed, stamina, and maturity. Mikey refrained from the fancy acrobatics in the spirit of fairness, but the duel was looking like something a group of Star Wars reenactment newbies would put on and upload to the internet, with some rather dramatic chanting monks in the background. Raphael was laughing his shell off.

"Yes—Obi-Wan has taught you well," Mikey said, as they locked wooden and bamboo blades. "Now you will understand the true nature of the dark side of ninjitsu butt-kicking!"

Leo couldn't take it any longer, and rolled the door further open. "Okay—I don't care what you say, Raph does *not* get to be Obi-Wan."

Mikey laughed, then tossed his practice sword at Leo. "It's true, dudes. Now, Lizzie, we get to see the true battle of good and evil: Leo as Obi-Wan and Raph as *Darth Vader* !"

Raph, however, was massaging his shoulder and still recovering from a laughing fit. "Naw, man, I'm too tired to be Darth Vader. And why do I always have t'be the Sith guys?"

"Admit it, bro. You do it to yourself—there's something about the brooding loner bit on the outlaw motorcycle that just doesn't lend itself well to the whole Jedi thing," Leo shrugged, then smiled warmly. "And on that note, we have some training up top to do this evening."

Raph groaned. "You just kicked my ass all over half the upper Manhattan sewer system—now ya want more?" He looked at Lizzie.

"You okay trainin' and playin' video games with just Mikey for a while, kiddo?"

She considered him with the utmost seriousness for a moment, before steadfastly nodding. "You're Han Solo, Raphi," she said, with a deadpan expression, before saluting with her overlarge bamboo shinaii.

Raphael grinned despite himself and pretended to straighten his shell like a pair of suspenders. "Yeah. I like that. Just better lookin', right?"

Mikey howled. "April always did wonder why she always had to dream of turtles comin' to the rescue instead of Harrison Ford, dude."

Leo put an arm around Raph's shoulders and shepherded him out. "Just don't switch your fedora to the Indiana Jones hat and we should be fine."

They perched on the rooftops at sunset, when the shadows are most pronounced; the sky glowed the same deep red of the dragon kanji that had heralded a murder earlier that day. Leo looked at his brother seriously.

"That kid is acting strange for someone whose mother was just killed right in front of her."

"Oh, really?" Raph asked, raising his skeptical eyebrow ridge. "Your mother ever get killed in front a' you?"

Leo frowned. "You know very well our mother wasn't killed in front of us, and even if she had been, we wouldn't remember."

Raphael drew closer to his brother's face. "Then how the hell would you know what someone's supposed ta act like when somethin' like that happens? And everyone handles shit different, right? I don't think it's weird, bro."

"I'm just trying to look out for you, little brother. It seems a little suspicious—I don't want your compassion for this little girl to hurt you in the end." Leo said this without directly looking at Raphael, so as to spare his pride; he instead scanned the active skyline, the helicopters taking weather and traffic surveys on and off the island, the deepening, Sin City atmosphere, the sirens growing louder and less far-between.

Raphael almost told his brother he didn't need him to look out for him, but held his tongue, knowing from the last two months that it wouldn't be true. Something about taking in the little girl and playing with both her and with Mikey—something the two of them had stopped doing over the last year-and-a-half—reminded him that it felt good to be needed and looked up to, and he could, for small moments, like light between floorboards to a dark basement below, use this to see himself through Leonardo's eyes.

"She's… she's just a little kid, y'know? She shouldn't have to deal with us bein' suspicious, man—she shouldn't have to deal with any of this. She should be at home, with her mom, doin' homework and… I don't know, playin' baseball outside or somethin'. I don't wanna make anythin' harder for her. At least she's safe with us."

Leo nodded, still studying the skyline; he could feel from his brother's voice that a war was happening on his face.

"I know, Raph, and it's… well, it's noble of you, to say the least. But I guess what I'm saying is that—well, I'm afraid for you."

"Why? Aren't I doin' the right thing? I didn't know what else to do—I mean, the Foot killed her mother, and they're *our* enemies, right?"

Leo shook his head. "It's not that I don't think you did the right thing—I mean, I was there, I would've stopped you otherwise—it's just that I'm worried you're confusing how you feel about Splinter being gone with what's happened to this little girl. I'm worried you won't see things clearly when you need to, and you won't be able to let her go."

"What about Mikey?" Raph asked, somewhat more confrontationally.

Now Leo looked at him. "I'm not worried about him—he's far more tied to this family as a whole than you allow yourself to be openly. I've seen him give up far more so that we can stay together. It's one of his stronger points—and one of your weakest. You tend to see us each as individual elements and forget us as a unit. So you and I are going to train out here as a unit until you get it."

It happened so fast and came so far out of left field that Raphael didn't notice until he felt distinct cold on his wrist, and looked down; Leo had handcuffed them together, his left hand to Raph's right. Raphael felt like punching him.

"You gotta be kiddin' me!"

Leo smiled a bit facetiously. "Just be thankful you're handcuffed to *me* instead of to Mikey—at least I won't be obnoxious about it."

Raphael growled and ranted as Leo began leading him toward the edge of the wall. "You *are* obnoxious—every, single, know-it-all, goody-two-shoes Bushido bullshit thing you say is obnoxious! Even your face is obnoxious!"

Leo only laughed at him, serving to make him angrier. "Talk is cheap, little brother; if you can actually work in tandem with me, then I'll unlock us. Shouldn't be too hard—all you have to do is pay attention." He began running, feeling Raph's weight drag on him as he resisted.

"What are we doing?" Raph asked apprehensively; something about being chained to his brother and robbed of his independence so high above the ground was making him feel a bit queasy.

"Jumping, of course, so I suggest you start building up speed!"

Raphael barely had time to do this before they were leaping through the air to the next rooftop; he was forced to watch Leo's landing

position and try to keep his even, so the shock of hitting it wouldn't jar him. He was not successful, and both landed straight on their faces. Leo looked at him, after peeling his nose off the roof painfully.

"Try again, little brother."

"Hey—if we're workin' in tandem, then that was half your fault," Raph pointed out.

The sky had dimmed from red to midnight blue, showing off the glare of Manhattan lights; sirens conquered the city—reminding Raphael of free nights, unfettered. He almost sensed in himself regret, until he felt the reminder on his wrist. This was the meaning of being a person, defined only by the presence of his brothers, without whom he was a ghost. He and Leo helped each other awkwardly to stand. They ran again, and again; the third time, jumping a shorter distance, they managed to land at the same time and absorb the shock equally. On a fourth try, however, Leonardo did not pick up speed fast enough to reach the height of Raphael's jump; when the disparity became too great at the point of the arc, Leo's weight pulled them both downward, and they missed the next roof by several feet. Raph plunged his sai into the side of the building, holding them both from falling ten stories down, and feeling as though the handcuff would rip his arm off.

"Leo—see if you can grab my arm instead of hangin' by that thing, huh?"

Leo swung upwards and they grasped by the forearms. Raph wouldn't be able to climb using his sai unless he had the use of both hands, and told his brother so; Leo, however, smiled.

"I'm borrowing your other sai; this is going to be extremely hard, Raph"—Leo said, reaching up to take the sai from his brother's belt with his free hand, and then plunging it into the wall as well—"but we're climbing this wall like a single person."

Now possessing a tight grip on the wall of his own, Leo wound their handcuffed forearms together and flexed his muscles; once he'd done that, he took the sai out and plunged it in again at the same level as Raph's significantly higher up.

Raphael watched him disbelievingly, flexing his arm as hard as possible to stop Leo from falling. "This is insane—just unlock us before we both die, ya moron!"

Leo looked at him, now that they were level. "Climb. I've got ya."

Shaking his head and trembling slightly, Raph tensed his arm muscles again to stay up, with only Leo to support him after he'd taken the sai from the wall, and dug it in higher up. He then shifted his weight to it and used it to pull them up a couple feet. He felt Leo put his weight on him, and helped him lift up to do the same, overhand, overhand, until they rolled, exhausted, over the ledge and onto the roof.

"I swear to God, Leo…" Raph said, panting. "You are one goddamn heavy turtle."

"You're no tinkerbell yourself, you know…" Leo said, sounding half-dead. "But that was really good… A few more jumps and then it's dinner time."

"Okay—but we're not eatin' like a single person. I'll take a hacksaw to these things if I have to."

"This is a most touching scene," came a foreign voice from the other side of the roof; English did not appear to be the person's first language, and this explained itself when they saw it to be a Foot ninja, perched on the far ledge. "Stand, turtles—I come to deliver a message."

Ghost, Eyes, Vigilante, Clown

Raph and Leo were already on their feet, Raphael's sais in either free hand and at the ready. Raph whispered in his brother's ear. "Put the sai back in my belt and draw one of your swords; it'll increase our range on one side, even though they'll have'ta come in close to fight the sai. That'll give us an advantage."

Leonardo, impressed, sheathed Raph's sai for him and drew his own sword.

"How can we help you, gentlemen?" Leo asked, cordially and with a note of threat; the first Foot ninja was imperceptibly joined by others, filling in the shadows on all sides, herding the brothers towards the edge of the wall they'd just scaled. Leo felt glad he'd handcuffed Raph's right hand, as he would need his own stronger right to wield his sword with all the force possible; the shorter sai in Raph's left hand would be powerfully employed from either side. He was, however, worried that Raph would be unaccustomed to the *ninjaken* 's range and underestimate his hits; of the four of them, Raphael always fought closest to his enemies.

The Foot ninja who spoke to them first came closer. "Our master wishes to speak to the leader of the turtles. We are new to our sister organization's territory, and have seen both of you at the lead of your brotherhood. What are your names, and which of you may rightly claim the title of leader?"

Raph looked at his brother seriously, and whispered, "It's probably a trap—d'ya want me to go as a decoy? You can follow and lead the guys back to get me."

Leo shook his head at him, then glared back at the Foot ninja addressing them. "My name's Leonardo, and this is my brother Raphael. We both lead, so we'll both have to go."

The Foot ninja nodded, and gestured to them to follow. Raph and Leo ran across the rooftops, flanked by the ninjas, still handcuffed together.

"Are you gonna unlock us anytime, Leo?"

"Don't you think I tried already? I lost it."

" *Lost it* ?" Raph growled. "You lost the key? You're gonna lose your *head* pretty quick here."

"We'll figure it out," Leo sighed. "And whatever you do, don't say anything to contradict what I said back there."

"Yeah—why'd you say that, anyways?" Raph hissed as they jumped. "Nobody's gonna know how ta find us now."

"I said it because it's not a trap," Leo responded, looking straight ahead at the dark skyline. "And because it's true."

Raph was silent for a long portion of the run; just as the Foot led them to ground level, Leo found his brother looking at him. "I guess I don't understand."

Leo smiled. "These people think of leaders as masters—they're really looking for someone like Master Splinter, whose advice we more or less follow and whose orders we mostly carry out all the time. You're not my retainer; I can't force you to do anything, nor have you ever been fully obligated to do as I say unless Master Splinter said the same thing. They might not understand the difference between elder brother and the leader of a clan, so the only way to do this is for both of us to go in Master Splinter's place. It's the honorable thing to do. I expect it's Karai that wants to talk to us."

Raphael rolled his eyes. "Bro, you're too much. Ain't she gonna laugh when we come runnin' in there chained to each other like a coupla morons?"

"I suppose if she asks, we'll simply tell her it was a training exercise. We're walking in concert—it was rather successful, I'd say." Leo smiled; his brother scowled.

"Creepy's what I'd call it. Like *1984* or somethin'."

"You've really gotta lay off the dystopian and afterlife stuff, Raph. I think I'll loan you Yasunari Kawabata when we get home. Or you might enjoy *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* ."

"If you think I'm readin' about cranes or metaphysics, big bro," Raph hissed, "you gotta 'nother thing comin'." He shook his right wrist. "I can't believe this bull"—

"Don't curse—or say anything that might denigrate our social unit with dishonor. Remember, what you do reflects on all of us. If Karai is truly taking over the New York branch of the Foot, we'll need the utmost respect between our two groups."

"I'll respect her with the better end of my sai if I find out she put the hit out on Lizzie's mom, Leo."

"Innocent until proven guilty, Raphael."

Raph mocked his voice. "Shredder's crony 'til proven otherwise, *Leonardo* ."

Leo shoved him; Raph shoved back.

"Do you have to act like a jerk?"

"D'ya have to act like Yoda?"

"Stop copying me!"

"Okay—now who's immature?"

"I never called you immature!"

"You insinuated!"

" *When ?*"

Their whispered conversation had gotten the attention of the nearby Foot ninjas as they all scaled a fire escape, and Leo and Raph could hear distinct snickering. Considering they looked like entrants into a three-legged race for prison inmates, the turtles weren't necessarily surprised.

"You're an embarrassment," Leo whispered. "I can't take you anywhere."

"You're the one who lost the key, ya dumbass."

Leonardo laughed despite himself, remembering a conversation almost exactly like this one repeating indefinitely, layering instance upon instance, into one long, drawn-out battle of words (and fists and broken lead pipes and… whatever else was at hand) between himself and his brother.

"We sound like we're twelve."

"Oh, ya noticed?" Raph asked, sarcastically. "I thought you had some strategy behind losin' the key."

"Will you let it go? Look on the bright side. Think of this as a furthering of our training exercise."

"The only bright side a' this'll be the radioactive fish when they dump us in the Atlantic."

Leo sighed, and shook his head, finally deciding not to rebut, before imagining a three-eyed fish and chuckling.

"Don't knock it—they might make great roommates!" Leo responded, trying not to appear any more undignified than he already was, chained to his brother and flanked by men in footie pajamas. "The

Foot in footie pajamas…" he then wheezed, though Raphael couldn't understand him.

"Bro, are you okay?" Raph asked him. "You're freakin' me out a little."

Leonardo thought about it, and came to the conclusion that he wasn't alright. Furthermore, he hadn't been, and he certainly wasn't now. Fighting with his little brother both dispelled the feeling and brought it back; Splinter was not there to tell them not to bicker; he might never be there again. The shadows sharpened and blackened. The Foot led them on ground level towards an abandoned building bespangled with graffiti. It also hit Leo that Raphael might have actually been right, and himself wrong—they could be walking quite willingly into a trap, and not only had he dragged his brother with him, but he had handcuffed him as well, so their fates entirely depended on one another. Raph had trusted him and had placed his life partially in his hands, and Leo had not actually bargained for a trap.

"Um, Raph—if I *had* the key"—

"I wouldn't leave you here, big brother. Killin' you would be my pleasure alone," Raph responded, before he could say another word. Leo smiled.

"Thanks… I guess. You're sure you wouldn't wanna back out?"

"What—and let you have all the fun? Dream on, Leo."

"Good—'cause I'm thinking there's a possibility"—

"Well, yeah—you'd have to be stupid not to consider that, Leo. I mean, I know you like to expect the best outta people and stuff, but this is the Foot we're talkin' about."

"They didn't blindfold us," Leo whispered, even quieter than before. "That means they don't care if we know where they are. Either they

don't see us as a threat or they're convinced we won't make it out alive. I should've seen it!"

"Hey, this could be a temp headquarters or somethin', right? Don't be so hard on yourself."

"I'm putting you in danger. Some big brother, huh?"

Raph sighed, and found himself dragging a rather blue (and not just the color of his ninja mask) turtle into Foot headquarters behind the Foot messenger and his larks. The abandoned building was deceptive from the outside; inside was well-furnished, with white and metal walls. If it was temporary, Raph hated to see what permanent headquarters for Karai would look like.

"Huh—guess the Foot in the city just needed a woman's touch," Raph commented, snickering. "I always hated that city dump ghetto blaster look Shredder had goin' on."

"Why d'you always have to joke right when I'm trying to tell you I'm wrong about something?"

"Just 'cause you're tellin' me doesn't mean I didn't already know."

Leo sighed, chained to his brother, as the Foot led them inexorably, not to a room with Karai, but a long chamber leading off into darkness. The ninjas stepped back, leaving Leo and Raphael standing facing the darkness.

"To speak with our leader you must pass three tests," the original Foot said, in a somewhat deeper voice than previously, crossing his arms. "You have already passed your first, in the fight against the thirteen monsters and Winters's stone generals. Two more lay ahead of you, turtle brothers. Our leader shall be watching you from eyes in the walls."

A loud clunking sounded from the ceiling; a pendulum holding one massive, crescent moon-shaped blade, swung down two inches in

front of Leo and Raph's faces, arching back up before falling again. Both flinched, but did not recoil, as the pendulum separated them from the Foot in the doorway. They turned back to the hallway; it had come alive with a swarm of blades swinging in all directions and from all angles of wall, floor and ceiling.

"I am so gonna enjoy killin' you once we get outta this," Raphael growled under his breath, making Leo smile. *Once we get outta this* . His brother never intended on dying or losing; it simply wasn't one of his options. This brutish, teen irreverence for mortality carried an aura Leonardo felt he himself had lost at some point along the road; his own mortality dragged on him with the weight of his three brothers, the weight of his world, the weight of responsibility. Oh, to be a younger brother and be immortal.

"You ready for this, Raph?" he asked, his voice deep and determined. "You'll have to pay close attention with me on your right."

"Don't really have much choice, do I? Not too interested in becomin' turtle pepperoni." Raphael grinned rakishly. "First one who loses part a' their mask buys pizza."

"Deal. On three—one"—

"Two"—

"THREE!"

Dinnertime arrived and Mikey and Donnie still hadn't heard from their brothers; Lizzie sat at the table with them, anxiety lurking about her normally marbleized features, and becoming smaller and smaller inside her pile of odd clothes. Mikey made a pizza, putting lots of veggies on it to make what he hoped would be a balanced meal for her, placed a bowl of Mallows in the middle of the table, and ate with her, while Donatello paced. He had managed to get samples of DNA from Lizzie in Raph and Leo's absence and had left them to react for later analysis. He could feel the silent little girl watching him with her

eyes, until Mikey began doing tricks with his yo-yo in between bites. She had a way of watching everything studiously, as though anxious to replicate it.

"Check it out—walk the dog!" Mikey said, letting his yo-yo scoot along the floor like a toy poodle. When he had finished this trick, Lizzie put her pizza down, with a very serious face, as usual.

"Raphi's missing dinner and yo-yo tricks," she said, matter-of-factly. She did not seem to have conversational speaking down. "For why?"

The *why* was addressed to Donatello, who did not seem to hear her. He was staring at the wild cherry and belladonna swab in his hands.

"Uh, dude—Lizzie's gotta question for ya," Mikey snickered.

Donnie started and stared at her; he was notoriously bad with human relationships and far worse when it came to children. "Why're you asking *me* ?"

Lizzie remained slate-faced. "You do science stuff. You know."

Donnie adjusted his goggles before taking them off. "That doesn't exactly help me in this situation, Elizabeth—I really don't know why Raph's not back yet. He's with our big brother, though. I'm assuming nothing bad's happened to him. Unless they finally killed each other."

Lizzie blinked at him, absorbing this. She then went back to her pizza quietly, a small crease between her eyebrows. Her red hair fell in front of her face.

Mikey scoffed and flipped open his cell phone. "Uh… or we could just, like, *call* them." He tried first Raphael's number, then Leo's, coming to their mailboxes; Lizzie and Donnie could hear both of their voices on the away messages.

" *This is Raph. I probably haven't answered your call for one of three reasons. One: I wanna talk to you, but can't right now. Two: I don't*

wanna talk to you, and I'm ignorin' your call. Three: I desperately wanna talk to you, but I'm trapped under somethin' heavy or gettin' my butt kicked by about fifty assholes. If it's options one or three, I'll probably get back t' ya. "

" *Hi, you've reached Leonardo. I'm not able to answer the phone right now, but leave a brief message with your number and I'll be sure to call you back. If this is Mikey with one of your stupid prank calls, Don is gonna kill you for running up the cell bills, so STOP DOING IT.* "

Lizzie cracked a smile, and Mikey laughed. "Man, I dig Leo's messages. So full of brotherly love. They're probably still training, dudes."

Donnie stopped pacing. "You know—I've never known Leo and Raph to miss dinner, no matter what they're doing. But Raph does know a lot of businesses up top since his Nightwatcher days—maybe they ran into some dinner during their training."

Mikey chuckled. "Ya make it sound like Raph runs into criminals and eats 'em for supper, dude."

"Wouldn't surprise me in the slightest, little bro."

"My mom likes pineapple," Lizzie said, with the utmost gravity, before taking another piece of pizza. Mikey watched her with what Donnie thought was a sad expression, then did more yo-yo tricks, almost helplessly—as though the yo-yo were pulling him by its string. Through the little girl, Donnie saw his little brother as through an x-ray that flickered on and off; he saw his little brother, one foot in childhood and one foot somewhere else, tethered in that zone by the three brothers above him, all of whom had to grow before he could move up as well, otherwise he would have no niche. He saw someone whose only place in their home was as the baby; he saw someone who was taken more seriously by a traumatized, homeless little girl than by his own family. He saw Michelangelo holding onto the kid as onto something important within himself. He saw someone

who humbled himself everyday as a clown, while the wedge between himself and those children he performed for grew larger and larger—while on the island he was on there was nothing to turn to. Nothing, except yo-yo tricks and a lost little girl, playing Star Wars with shinaii while Raphael sat on the island, however briefly, alongside him, offering mercy Mikey didn't often see from his closest brother. Donatello saw the face behind the clown in these flickering moments and didn't quite know what to do with what he saw. He was a person who often saw and studied things without any desire to affect them, nor any way to do so. He saw his three brothers: the ghost, the vigilante, the clown—himself, the eyes. And so the x-ray flickered on and off and eventually Donnie turned away from it, towards his alcove, and returned to the table with his chess set.

"You two against me?" he asked, with a half-smile.

My Brother's Keeper

"BANZAI!" Leo yelled, as he leapt gung-ho through the first obstacle, an over-under set of blades that required that his brother follow him without getting their arms chopped off.

"Heeeere's JOHNNIE!" Raph yelled simultaneously, sounding like a regular maniac and nearly getting decapitated before bending backwards half into his shell.

They stopped to appraise the situation at the next set—spikes that sliced from either wall and hit each other, like horizontal sets of teeth, in the center with a great sluicing sound, before moving slowly backwards. They came in at irregular intervals, sometimes not retracting all the way before charging yet again. Leo waited and squinted to see a pattern.

"Two all the way back, one three quarters in, one half-way in, one three quarters out, three all the way back again," he said, triumphantly. "It's programmed on a circuit. We'll just wait until it starts to go back all the way."

Raph, however, watching them sluice together over and over, grew fidgety. "Can't we just break for it? We could make that jump easy, bro."

"We'll need all the time possible, since we have to go through at the same time. So just relax. Meditate."

"To hell with meditatin'," Raph grumbled. "I'm freaked those yahoos're watchin' us from the walls or some shit."

"Stop cursing—they can probably hear you in Brooklyn."

"Yeah, screw you too, Brooklyn!"

Leo pulled on the handcuff. "Circuit's complete—let's go!"

They ran for the opening aperture; it, however, expanded to one-fourth before slamming back in their faces.

"Got any other bright ideas, Mr. Wizard?" Raph asked.

"It tricked us!" Leo said, impressed.

"Maybe some nut-job's pushin' the button, ya think a' that?" Raph demanded. "Wait till it gets past three fourths—then just jump."

"That's a bad idea, Raph"—

"Will you just *trust* me for once?!"

They did so and landed just in time, barely getting their shells out of the way of being crushed. Immediately another set of pendulums swung before them, this time with no space in between as respite. The brothers found themselves playing a heavily-contested game of Follow the Leader, in which neither of them could seem to decide who exactly was leading. When three came at them from opposite directions, Raph and Leo pulled at each other, one going right and the other going left—Raph was then forced to hit the ground to avoid the chop, yanking his brother down with him abruptly.

"This is the stupidest thing I've ever seen!" Raph growled.

"C'mon—I got an idea!" Leo pulled at him, and placed their handcuffed arms right in the path of a pendulum—it hit the handcuff chains between them, but instead of severing it, the angle merely sent them both flying backwards towards another cutting slits through the air, and Leo found himself grabbing onto it just above the blade and being swept off the ground. Raph yelled as it dragged him, steps away from the laser-sharp edge and just able to keep his feet on the ground; he yanked hard and brought his brother earthward with an angry shout.

"Damn it, Leo—just lead the way and RUN, you jackass!"

"We have to think this through, Raph!"

"I NEVER think! Just do it; we'll be fine!"

"That's part of your problem, Raphael"—

"Stop tellin' me my goddamn problems, Leo! You win! You wanna work together, then the only way to do it is for you to lead and I'll follow. Just stop over-thinking it—I been following your ass for a long time; I'm capable of doing what you do, 'kay?"

Leonardo blinked at his seething younger brother, then ducked to avoid another pendulum as it swung over their heads.

"You lead, Raph. Just—just do it. Like you said."

Raphael squinted at him, as in mistrust, then hauled them both to their feet. He began running; but rather than just going and pulling Leo behind him, he began shouting his moves behind him.

"Alright—quick left!" In a wave motion, Leo reflected and moved behind him; Raph had gone slightly right when he said that, and as a result the pendulum swung between their shoulders. Leo realized Raphael was thinking, and himself, for one of the first times, following—and smiled.

"Next one's you, Leo!" Raph said behind him, after they'd made it part of the way down the substantial hallway. Raphael moved behind him, now that they had a small respite, and Leonardo nodded.

"Forward handspring and double flip—stay close!" Leo shouted, as they came upon two blades sweeping parallel to the floor; at the end of their flips they landed on top of the blades and used them as springboards to jump clean over the next two, a pair of spikes lancing across the middle of the small space. When they landed, it was a matter of another five minutes before the blades stopped altogether. The Foot were waiting for them there, as the brothers rested, drawing deep breaths of air.

"You have reached the last part of the second test, young ninja," the deep-voiced Foot ninja said, his arms crossed. "Now you must defeat the metal *youkai* ."

"The metal demon?" Leo responded, between slowing gasps.

"Indeed, turtles. The demon." The Foot stepped aside and vanished; at the end of the hall was a slightly larger room, made of metal, with a small alcove at its back. Leo and Raph advanced, though the latter was dragging.

"Leo—I got a *bad* feelin' about this."

"Shhh… just fight like we discussed on the roof. Sai and sword, long range and short. Let my range act like a shield."

They waited in trepidation for a few silent moments; the alcove's shadows appeared to stir at last, and a small bluish light surrounded them in the dimness. From the alcove emerged the outline of a nightmare… the spiked helmet, the jagged arms, the imposing shape—eight feet tall at least—a pair of glowing, mechanical eyes—the suit of the Shredder, with no face and no recognizable human attributes. It advanced upon them, whether clone or robot they couldn't tell, without speech and without purpose, other than to destroy.

Raph and Leo involuntarily took a simultaneous step backwards upon seeing it; Leonardo gasped, while Raphael watched in almost silent horror, only a hiss of breath escaping between his clenched teeth.

"That's the demon, all right," Raph whispered. He raised his sai at a forty-five degree angle; Leo raised his *ninjaken* so it was parallel to the ground, protecting his body and Raph's for the first assault—he felt Raphael's eyes on it, pondering. The metal demon raised one blade-strewn fist and brought it crashing down on them—Leo was sure his arm would give out under it, before he realized that they

were grinding metal on metal in mid-air, his sword holding its position, and glanced slightly left.

Raphael had hooked his sai in under the *ninjaken* near its tip, the way he would had the two weapons been doing battle, and as he had done in the past; this time, however, he used it to shove the metallic Shredder backwards in concert with his brother. The demon lunged again, coming in on Raph, who held him off with his sai—as the thing moved into the zone of the sai's shorter range, Leo came around and sliced downward, clean through its arm, to a herald of bright sparks and electrical charges. The thing moved backwards, calmly.

"It's a freakin' robot," Raph said, still astounded.

"Then let's give it the beating of its lifetime," Leo said, feeling suddenly powerful against the lumbering foe. It charged them again, this time straight into the middle; as if on instinct, they moved slightly apart and clothes-lined it with the strength of the handcuff. As it fell, if hooked its other bladed backhand into the loop around Leo's wrist, sending Leo and, behind him, Raphael backwards up into the air and towards the dark alcove from which it had come. They landed hard and rolled, tangled with each other and fighting to get to their feet; by the time they'd done so the thing charged again—it faked left out of the sai's range, and Leo spun to bring his sword up in front of Raphael; the metal Shredder used its sweeping momentum to bring its remaining arm down and around, swinging into Leo's shoulder and the side of his shell, causing him to sprawl on the floor in front of Raphael. Raph remained standing, crouched with their arms still connected, and raised his sai as to protect.

"Leo—you okay? Leo!"

Leo moaned, the deep, double gash on his shoulder starting to bleed profusely.

The thing brought all of its weight down on the back of its arm into the sai; Raph bent his knees, feeling them starting to buckle, as his

shoulder and joints shook; his feet slid backward—before he knew it he was face to face with Leo, who was painfully opening his eyes to see him, quivering under the massive force.

"Raph—get out of the way!"

Raphael blinked at him, realizing his brother had a hold of his other sai; he grinned, and dodged aside; the thing lost its balance as he suddenly moved, and buried its blades in the ground—as it did, Leo flung the sai expertly into its chest, starting a rain of static and sparks—the Shredder creature staggered backwards, engulfed in electricity. It made an ungodly, inhuman metallic sound, charging again—it slashed quickly sideways, with no clear target, and almost stepped on Leonardo, who was attempting to sit up in the pool of blood—when Raph went to kick it away, it staggered again and, with another shriek, slashed backwards across Raphael's face. Crimson laced the air, sprinkling his brother, who yelled out; Raph lanced away, dragging Leo with him, towards the alcove, like a wounded animal. His right eye filled with blood from the cut on his forehead, half-blinding him, and he brought his free hand to his face, trying to staunch the flow.

Leonardo got his brother into the alcove, and held the sai as the monster came at them, flailing wildly, bent on nothing save slashing them to ribbons. As it hit him in his crouching position, Leo felt sure he would be sent flying backwards, but found, as before, Raphael bracing him from behind, holding his shell in position with his shoulders; he sensed both his and Raph's blood trickling down the back of his shell in thick rivulets, and realized they were backed into a wall and heading quickly towards death if they didn't think of something fast.

"The sword, Leo—we need your sword for the head…" Raph said behind him; Leo felt his other sword lift out of its sheath. They were shell-to-shell, and Leo brought the creature in closer to him, making the zone smaller and smaller, well inside the *ninjaken* 's long and deadly range; the space of the alcove, however, was too narrow for Raph to make the necessary sweep. He felt his brother turning them

both clockwise, around the small axis of the handcuff, and thrust with all his strength, sending the creature back for just a moment; when it rebounded well within that small range, Raphael was there instead—he slashed around and buried the *ninjaken* into the Shredder's robotic neck. He had, however, as Leo guessed he might, not estimated for the sword's longer range, and hit too close to the hilt—instead of being swept cleanly off, he cut the head only half-way into the sparking steel, electrifying the sword and forcing him to let it go. In recourse, the creature slashed downwards again—Leo tried to move himself back into defense, but Raph simply turned around, guarding the entrance to the alcove, just in time. There was a massive crunching sound and another vivid splash of red.

When Leonardo opened his eyes they were both on the ground, himself on his back and Raph crouching above him, braced up by his hands; he was breathing very shallowly. Leo realized the creature had fallen, landing slightly on top of his and Raphael's legs—its blades, however, were missing from its remaining arm. His brother was looking at him with his one open eye; blood dripped down from his face onto the front of Leo's shell.

"Don's… gonna kill me… when he sees… my shell."

Leo tried to speak, but found his throat too tight to get a word in edgewise. He instead raised his bloody free arm up and hugged his younger brother to him, too moved to do otherwise.

He felt their shells sticking together with the glue of congealed gore, and decided he didn't care, while the nightmare sparked and sizzled behind him; his hand brushed the twin blades buried in Raphael's spider web shell, and the deepened crack running around them, shattered glass, and small wetnesses where blood had begun seeping out from underneath, where the points had gone through. There had been a time when Master Splinter hadn't been able to tell he and Raphael apart—as toddlers they'd been identical, brave and rambunctious, energetic and competitive. Now he and his brother, he realized, were forever marked out from each other—this stigmata, a fissure in the earth, the precipice that separated them. He held

Raphael tighter, afraid to lose him, listening to his thin breath escaping painfully in small gasps.

Someone applauded dully from the entrance of the room, and Leo cringed as he looked up and saw the Foot, advancing towards them.

"Excellent. You have passed the second test—will your brother be able to continue?"

Leonardo sat up, pulling his brother into a sitting position; Raphael watched them with his open eye, the other now glued shut under a viscous cake of red and dark brown—his pupils had gone small and murderous, to match Leo slightly above him.

"My brother's hurt—I have to get him out of here. Tell your leader I'll be back when he's safe."

The Foot ninja held up a hand. "If you can proceed you must do so now. Our medics will take care of your brother."

"Over my dead body they will!" Leo charged them, now shouting from the alcove. "You expect me to trust you with my little brother's life after what you've pulled?"

The Foot ninja held up his hands peaceably. "You already have. You convinced him to come here—and if you are truly the eldest, you are his *o-nii-san* ; you are clearly the leader of your family and if you feared for him, you should have ordered him to return home. If he is injured, you have not trained him hard enough to protect himself nor did you send him out of harm's way; it is your fault, not ours, that this has happened—Leonardo-san."

Raph quivered with anger under his free arm; their other arms remained connected. His voice was hoarse with pain. "Oh, *please* . Leo, tell this bozo to shut the hell up. I can go to the next test or whatever—we've come this far."

Leo helped him to stand; they were both on unsteady feet, and holding each other upright discreetly. "No, Raph. We're leaving. I'll come back later to speak with Karai about Lizzie."

"Leo—we did not come this far just so they can make you start over when ya come back! And what makes you think you could do the last test *without me* , anyways?"

Leo blinked down at him; the thought hadn't occurred to him, but he had passed the last two tests only with the aid of first all three of his brothers, and the second with Raph, the guardian of his right side. It seemed natural that he should have to pass the last alone, in the pattern of diminishing numbers—but if he couldn't get through the first tests without working ever closer with his brothers, how could he pass the last without them at all?

Another Foot ran up to the messenger, and whispered to him urgently; the messenger nodded, and bowed, peering at the turtles behind his mask.

"He cannot. Your tests are Stone, Metal, and last, Flesh. Our leader has decided what your final test shall be; to proceed forward, the victor of a duel between you shall decide an emissary from the turtles—the loser shall remain here. *Bisento* !"

Leo and Raphael exchanged glances; Raph remained looking up at him for a long while, even as a Foot ninja brought the messenger a large *bisento* —the immense axe-like blade on a long pole.

"Present your shackled wrists!" the messenger commanded. Leo, however, wound their forearms tightly together, as he had when they were climbing the sheer wall face.

"You cannot force me to fight my brother—especially not in the state he's in. It wouldn't be a fair fight, even if we would consent."

Raphael scowled. " *What are you doin' ?* At least let 'em take this thing off of us, Leo!" He forcefully disentangled himself, and the

messenger surged forward, chopping the chain in two and separating them.

Leo felt it reverberate through him, bad memories, a nightmare of rain and thunder—his brother, the ghost, the masked horror swinging chains like a madman, throwing hatred out at him, killer blades, that insane look of triumph; Raphael backed away from his embrace, but when they looked at each other, his expression was rather sober, and rather sad. The Foot handed each of them their weapons from around the metal chamber, and surrounded them, like spectators in a cock fight. Leonardo held his *ninjaken* in a relaxed state of readiness, letting Raphael make the decision, to make the first move, or to fall from blood loss, as he now swayed on his feet.

Raph looked down at his sai contemplatively; only seconds ago he had used them in concert with his brother, and they had been sheer forces, a part of a larger whole; now they seemed matte, useless, and dead. Almost sickly, he let them fall from his hands, to clatter dually on the cold ground, and looked into his brother's eyes. The Foot ninja glanced around, confused, as Leonardo walked forward, and placed the sharp edge of his blade just against Raphael's throat—who didn't raise a hand to defend himself. Blood dripped from his face—Raph could have been savage then, the pain and the blood loss surging like madness through his veins. Leo realized he could have been savage himself, as he put more pressure on his brother's jugular. They were killers there, in that room, the pair of them, and Leo had the power again; and as always, he hadn't taken it or earned it through superior swordplay—it had been given to him, with the weight of expectation—Raphael's surrender had its way of subjugating his older brother effortlessly, as it carried with it all the responsibilities of true power. Through his inaction Raphael had taken control of the situation, and he gave Leo a half smile.

"I'm not lettin' you back outta this, not when you're the one more fit to do it. Go talk to Karai about Lizzie. I'll wait for you here—I'll be fine 'til you're back."

"Pick up your sai or get back on my shoulder, Raphael," Leo ordered, unsure why he felt so angry. He wanted to protect his brother or fight him—this surrender sat uneasily, too new a compromise and so unlike Raph that he feared it. He didn't know what it meant; he was terrified of what it could mean. "I'm not—I *can't* leave you here."

I can't leave you to die .

He heard the steady drips of blood on metal, unsure whose it was; another pool had gathered under both of them, merged from the two their injuries had created. Raph just shrugged, following neither command.

"You are truly honorable brothers," a female voice emerged from the alcove. Leo lowered his swords and both he and Raph turned, to see the alcove had become a door, and in it stood Karai. "You have passed your third test, with flying colors, by asserting the connection within your flesh. Please come in—both of you."

To Be Oniisan

Author's Note: I'd like to say thank you really quick to those who reviewed the last chapter, as your reviews were partcularly eloquent and made me glad that I write. I'd also like to thank Gadoken King, my think-tank buddy, whose discussions entirely shaped Leonardo's development in this story and inspired the eighth chapter. READ HIS STORY, "The Real Turtles." It's well-written, and I highly recommend it. So everyone is aware, at this point this story is second in what is shaping up to be a trilogy. I got writing the ninth part of this and realized I will need another story arc to wrap things up. So, I hope you all stick with me. This story is almost complete (on my computer), and I will upload at intervals of a few days, as usual. In the meantime, I'll start work on the third. Hope you're enjoying! (Cultural note: - *dono* is an honorific of great respect, like saying Lady such-and-such; - *san* is an honorific of humble respect, like saying sir; - *kun* is an honorific used for and between young men or for a young boy--if used for someone you do not know well or who is not in your social unit is a mark of diminuation.)

A Foot ninja with a medical box followed them into the next chamber: a receiving room in the Japanese style, very calm and understated, yet nevertheless beautiful. Karai was wearing a black *gi* and dark blue *hakama* over this, a plain training outfit, with the dragon kanji on her sleeve. The floor was covered with *tatami* mats, and a table lay at the back, where the three of them knelt—Raphael doing this with some difficulty. The Foot medic leaned and began immediately swabbing the blood from Raphael's face to help him see; annoyed, Raph took the swab from him.

"Thanks, but I can do it myself. Gimme some pain killers if ya got 'em and vamoose." He then gingerly went to work getting the blood out of his eye; at Karai's nod, the medic left the box next to Leonardo, who took the swab from his struggling brother and started helping him, and receiving only one grudging look before he submitted to the assistance. His mask was soaked with blood and practically

blackened from its previous bright red; there were trickles down his neck in long, thick streaks, and pooled where he was attached to the front of his shell. Raph picked up another swab and went to work on the back of Leo's shoulder, which was crusted over on top of the oozing double wound. Karai, on the other side of the table, appeared to be making tea, with herbs Leo could now identify by smell: chamomile, St, John's Wart, jasmine, and a touch of *sake* to take the edge off the pain. He clenched his jaw as Raphael swabbed too deep with the alcohol-laden rag, but knew the wound to be full of bacteria; Raphael's face wounds looked like they might infect, as the same blades had already touched a profuse amount of blood before making the cuts, so he could imagine what his own shoulder looked like. It wasn't often that they weathered injuries of this kind; the handcuffs had partly been the reason. Partly.

Raphael at last cracked his eye opened tentatively, though it was still framed with rust and ooze. Leo gave it a few more cursory swabs and moved to the rest of his face, pained just to look at the deep wounds—when they closed, his brother would also have trouble opening his mouth without cracking them—something, he supposed a bit coldly, that could prove to be a blessing in disguise. Karai watched them both with interest.

"Your younger brother is very brave, Leonardo-san. Though, if he were my subordinate, I would have beaten him down long ago. Such bravery is reckless."

Raphael glared at her between the cracked lines of darkening blood rather savagely. "You givin' my brother leadership advice?"

Karai calmly poured tea. "His submission today was wise. I have seen you both leading your family into combat; at each instance I was both impressed and horrified. That the elder brother cannot keep reign and the younger brother cannot learn control, while the others follow haphazardly, and you somehow all manage to survive—and even win the day—is amazing on its own."

Leo smiled wryly. "Well—we're good at getting out by the skin of our shells. We used to be better, back in the days of the Shredder. We'd never been apart in the fifteen years before he showed up; when you saw us, we'd just reunited after a long period apart." He sighed. "Raph, I'm sorry, bro, but Don's gonna have to stitch up the lower one. The higher one was more of a graze, even though it bled out so much—it should heal okay. I'm pretty sure that one won't scar."

"I don't care," Raph mumbled, though Leo felt sure he wouldn't want a reminder of that encounter right on his face for the rest of his life, especially with one already on his shell. Leo gestured for him to turn; Karai flinched slightly, pushing the tea towards them.

"It must have taken much bravery to accept a blow such as that," she said, with a note of respect in her voice. Raphael clenched his fists and Leo touched the blades still buried in his shell.

"I'm really not sure if I should pull them out—we'll have to wait until we're home. I'll just clean you up a bit"—he touched the swab to the bloody fissures, putting pressure on the immense crack, but Raphael spun back around abruptly.

"It's fine—just don't touch it. I'm fine!" He clenched the side of the table, grinding his jaws together and breathing shallowly again. Leo clapped his shoulder, trying to give him some comfort. "Leo—you're gonna need stitches on both slashes, bro," Raphael gasped, attempting to sound normal.

Karai sat silently as Raph calmed himself, then poured tea. "Please, drink—it will help with the pain."

Leo nodded, thanking her, then accepted a cup for both himself and his brother, whom he forced to drink it, suppressing his objections.

"As you know, I asked you here to speak with you; but I suppose you came because you also wished to speak with me. What did you wish to speak about, Leonardo-san?"

Leo looked at Raph, who was not returning the glance; he instead had his eyes steadily on the teapot, and Leonardo realized that his brother could not identify what Karai had given them by taste or by smell, unlike himself. He also realized that he'd forced the mixture down Raph's throat without telling him he knew what it was, and merely expected him to trust it—something he supposed he might have once taken for granted, but could not afford to do now. He was second-guessing himself, wondering about his power as the so-called "elder brother." There are things one can slip into tea that are odorless, tasteless—powders, powerful poisons—alkaloids, in their purest form. Not wild cherry and belladonna, but boiled down in labs. This was not the jungle. Raphael had never been to Costa Rica, to Iceland, to Mongolia; he had seen the industrial atrocities human populations enact upon each other in the dark of inorganic alleys. When Leonardo thought, he realized he drank the tea from respect—not because he considered what its contents might be; he respected Karai, and this series of images she presented to him. The simplicity of the *tatami* mats. The order and justice of the tests. The Edo period painting behind her on the wall. The reeds made with quick, harmonious strokes on her black teapot—the swishing sounds of her *hakama* . This series of images that reminded him of his father so.

"We found a dead body in the sewers," Raph said, when Leo fell suddenly silent. "We went along with this so we could ask if ya knew anythin' 'bout it. Your symbol was left with her—my brother here thinks maybe it was a rogue a' yours."

"I see," Karai said, coldly; she had addressed her statement to Leonardo, who realized she was refusing to look at Raph. "Might you describe to me this woman and the nature of her death?"

Raphael almost responded; Leo threw him a quick look for silence. "Our brother is analyzing that now. From what we could ascertain, she died by shuriken and a katana. She was homeless, and dressed in dirty rags; she looked like she'd been living in the sewers."

"Yeah—didn't seem too much like a dangerous customer, know what I'm sayin'?" Raph couldn't resist adding, gritting his teeth as Karai

appeared to continue ignoring his presence.

She straightened her posture a bit more. "Leonardo-san—might I offer some advice? Your younger brother is impertinent. You should not allow him to speak unless he is addressed. Since he is injured, it would be unwise to allow him to get overexcited over this unfortunate accident."

Leo watched her as she spoke; her words were so clean and clear, so logical and so harmonious.

"Karai- *dono* "—he started, trying his utmost to be as respectful he could—"I apologize for my brother; I have no excuse"—

"You *what* ?" Raph sputtered, staring at Leonardo, then at Karai. "He has no reason to apologize for me—I could apologize for *myself* if I had to—but you put us through hell to get here and you haven't answered a single question yet!"

Leo stood, dragging Raph up with him by his arm. "Can I have a word with you, *Raphael* ?"

Raph took his arm away from his brother's grip, and whispered back. "About what—how you're sellin' me out at the last minute? Takin' her advice, Leo—wanna beat me down? I dare ya."

Leo pulled him forcefully towards the door, helped by the fact that Raph was slightly more light-headed than he at this point in the proceedings. "Why are you acting like this? You know I would never —do I even have to spell it out? If we want answers we must show respect! And she's right—the etiquette around here is that the eldest speaks and the youngest shuts up—so stop embarrassing me and shut the hell up. Got it?"

Raph looked like he was ready to punch him, but refrained. "I don't respect people like her, Leo. She's part of everythin' I hate about the world. Everythin' *you* hate too—she's just dressed up in a package of the things you trust. She's *tricking* you."

Leonardo almost repeated his orders, before he took a moment to ponder Raph's words, squinting at him. "What d'you mean by package?"

Raph groaned, exasperated. "Karai's a member a' the Foot clan, just like Master Yoshi was—and Master Splinter grew up in a place that looked exactly like this. Splinter raised us in a home modeled after that, and she *knows it* , Leo. It's like bein' on home turf, 'cept we're not—you're not in your element like ya think and you don't know what you're dealin' with! You think she's honorable 'cause that's what you want her t'be, not what she is!"

Leo rolled his eyes. "You're just mad because she's acting like you don't exist. Now I heard you out—come on." He tried to drag Raphael back, but felt his resistance pull at him like a weight.

"Yeah—and *you* should be mad too, big brother," Raph said under his breath, seething.

Karai spoke to them from her place before the table.

"I am sorry—this country is still strange to me. It seems I may have insulted you—but you must remember, Leonardo-san, that hierarchy and the ancient rules of etiquette, respect, and Bushido are needed when one wishes to practice *ninjitsu* in any way other than wonton assassination. Your brother is honest—but honesty can be dangerous to your family." She paused, watching their reactions calmly. "Perhaps our questions for each other are not so different. We have been looking for a young girl. She may have been witness to an accident during an experiment in one of our facilities, and we would like to question her."

Leonardo noticed that, as she spoke, Karai had been watching his brother's face; he felt Raph go still beside him, before that furious energy began bubbling beneath the surface of his skin, ready to send him unraveling into madness. He took Raphael's arm as a precaution. Karai, however, smiled.

"I see from your brother's face that I have—how is it said? I have hit a nerve?" She came around the table. "Raphael-kun—you have a soft spot for children, perhaps?"

Raphael didn't know the ins and outs of Japanese honorifics—but Leo did, and it was his turn to be insulted. "Karai—my brother may be my junior, but he's not a little boy. Don't speak to him like he is. As for a child, we haven't seen one. Don't torture my brother with the idea that some poor kid is running around out there from your clan."

Karai appeared intrigued. "Raphael-kun, your face is very transparent. Your *o-nii-san* cannot cover for you forever."

Leo heard a rather unintelligent but clearly-readable guttural sound of anger emerge from Raph's throat, and moved back into control of the situation. "Karai, please—my brother is just injured"—

"Your brother knows, Leonardo-san—and his entire body is itching to tell," Karai said, simply. "A woman, Daphne Roberts, was playing assistant in a top-secret lab kept even from me. She witnessed a project she should never have been privy to—the individual running that lab hence made of her an experiment. She escaped, and all other assistants in that lab have been killed. I must find her child, to discover if she too fell victim to the experiment."

Raphael started past him, and Leo held out an arm, holding him back; his brother struggled massively.

" *You* did it—I knew it, I knew it the whole time! Lemme go, Leo! I'm gonna rip her apart!"

"Calm down, little brother—you're gonna hurt yourself"—

"SHUT UP!"

Leo realized his brother was in angry tears, and did not allow himself to feel the betrayal that his brother felt. There was an explanation for this, far from Raphael's simple emotions and black-and-white logic.

He was now holding him back by the shoulders, and, tightening his grip, pressed into Raph's shell.

Raph let out an ungodly yell himself and, as a reflex, elbowed Leonardo backwards into the wall behind them. He felt a cold breath around his face, and saw, out of his peripheral vision, flashes of silver. Six shuriken buried themselves in the wall, flanking Leonardo's arms without leaving a scratch; the last two on either side of his neck; they were tinged with purple. Leo sniffed, and recognized what he smelled. Karai walked forward.

"Raphael-kun—your *o-nii-san* can perhaps tell you, that if he should be pricked by those shuriken he will die within minutes. That means he cannot leave the wall, and if you start to remove them, you will be dead before you take a step. Is everything I have said understood?"

Raphael's voice was gruff; his eyes glared at her, a fan of crimson shading them from the outsides in. "Leo? She tellin' me the truth?"

Leo kept the panic from his voice. "Yeah, Raph. It's cyanide."

Karai held out her katana. "The Foot ninja do not normally use such tactics. We prefer an honorable blade—but the only way to slow down the experiment was through the poison. She had a peaceful death. Your brother is already injured, Raphael-kun. Tell me what you know of the girl, and I will release you both with my thanks."

Raphael almost made an ugly statement, feeling his anger beating and flapping at his ribcage like a pair of furious wings, on a caged demon. He then looked at his brother, thinking of how he might handle it had their positions been reversed and Karai had not put him so off guard, and started walking towards him. No shuriken came their way.

"Fool. You think I will simply let you walk out of here?" Karai asked, obviously hesitating.

Raph turned and sneered at her. "You invited us. We passed your tests; my brother's shown you the greatest respect. If your Foot clan has any so-called *honor* , you'll let me get my injured brother down and take him out of here. For his sake, if not for mine. Your honor an' his, I guess."

Karai's katana was an inch from his throat before he could trace her with his eyes; Raphael didn't flinch. "You dare to question my honor?"

Raph almost laughed. "Honor? Wanna talk about honor? Apparently it'd be *rude* of me as the little brother to tell you anythin' without my *o-nii-san* 's direct command. Sorry. Lips are zipped. Scout's honor."

He grabbed each shuriken by its center, avoiding the purple tips, and pulled them carefully from the wall, letting them clink on the floor. He took Leo's arm.

"Thanks for the tea," he grumbled, but Leo hung back, staring at her.

"You can't tell me… any reason for this? I don't understand why she had to die. She looked so harmless."

"I have no excuse that I can tell you, Leonardo-san," Karai bowed to him. She nodded in Raphael's direction. "I would watch him if I were you."

Leo almost scowled, and answered curtly. "I do. Thanks."

Transparence and Permanence

Lizzie and Mikey had lost spectacularly to Donnie two times in a row and were well on their way to a third, when April arrived through the fake sewer wall behind them. Donatello stood quickly, placing himself in front of Lizzie, who looked like a pile of rags in a chair anyway.

"Hey, April. How was the shop today?"

April raised an eyebrow, as Donnie had spoken just a little faster than usual. He led her toward his alcove, signaling to Mikey behind his back.

"It was great. I received an order for some Heian antiquities. I'll probably have to make a trip to Japan—I can try to sneak Splinter back with me, if he's still there. You guys needed to speak to me? Where's the little girl?"

Don, distracted, skipped past the comment about Splinter, and started rifling with some tools. "Uh, yeah—listen, something happened in the sewers and Raph and Leo have been gone for awhile"—

April, looking concerned, was about to speak, when Mikey's voice came from behind them.

"Raph toldja we'd get ya a flower girl," Mikey said, with Lizzie riding piggy-back on his shell. She watched April shyly over his shoulder.

April gasped. "Oh my god—she looks like a skeleton! Where'd you find her—what happened? Are Leo and Raph okay?" She ran forward checking on the girl, who burrowed into her rags.

Donnie lifted his arms to calm her. "I'm sure they're fine—they just went off for training while I took some blood samples. But, listen…

we really aren't sure what to do with her. We think someone's after her, so we shouldn't go to foster services yet."

April took a few breaths. "When you said you had a ten-year-old, I didn't think you meant one who needed to be in a hospital. She looks like she hasn't eaten in weeks!"

Mikey smiled disarmingly. "Really? She did totally fine in shinaii practice today. And she's got a mean appetite."

April looked at Donnie. "You said you took blood samples. For what?"

"Her mother had abnormal DNA—I wanted to check her. But so far, there's been nothing odd," Donnie said, glancing over a spreadsheet with the girl's DNA profile.

April sighed, and smiled at Lizzie. "What's your name, sweetie?"

"Not sweet," Lizzie said shortly, defiantly—her face was slate and slightly wild. "Raphi says I'm Lizzie."

April giggled. "That's kind of cute. I would expect Raph to give her a strange name—like Blade or something."

Donnie chuckled. "At least Mikey didn't get a say—probably be something from My Little Ponies, just to makes us all nuts."

April patted his shell. "I suppose you guys will have to keep her here until whoever's after her… *isn't* anymore. Or me and Casey could take her off your hands for a while."

Mikey protested immediately. "No—hey, it's fine! We don't mind havin' the dudette around… you and Casey just got your own place, and you're plannin' for the big day, and stuff…"

Donnie gave him a look for silence, and folded his arms. He found the offer, of course, tempting; the girl disturbed their family bubble and was a source of possible contention, particularly between

himself and Raph, and Raph and Leo—something the older brothers certainly didn't need. But on logical reflection…

"That's very kind, April, but she's probably safer here. It might be the Foot after her, and we don't want to make you and Casey targets for them—you've already lost your apartment and store once to that. I'm sure we'll figure it out."

Mikey looked shocked, but smiled hugely, and began to sing. "Donnie likes the kid, Donnie likes the kid…"

Donatello rolled his eyes. "Will you please act like the sixteen-year-old you are, and not the ten-year-old *she* is?"

Lizzie perked up on Mikey's back. "I don't sing."

Donnie smiled at April. "She's not really much of a conversationalist. But she's been through a lot."

Lizzie's eyes were following him fiercely, even when Mikey began spinning in circles to give her a ride.

"Giddy-up, dudette! Ninja cowgirl!"

April whispered to Don. "Why does she stare at you like that?"

Donnie shrugged. "I think she believes that I know where Raph is, which I don't. Because I do 'science', apparently."

She nudged him playfully. "Or maybe she knows how uncomfortable you are around her."

Donatello blinked rapidly. "That's… that's preposterous. She doesn't even *know* me."

April laughed. "It's not like you're some hermit scientist living in a lab on top of a hill, Donnie, who people see maybe once every ten years! You're a kid—you're sixteen! She's ten! It's not that hard for her to see right through you." She kissed his cheek as he looked

around, trying to find something to focus himself on embarrassedly. "I sure can."

If Donatello wasn't so fiercely green, he would have flushed bright crimson; people often got the point when he kept them at a distance and maintained that barrier like a well-tended gate between two properties; if they got him, people usually didn't say so—unfortunately for Donnie, these "people" were mostly his family, and a handful of humans. Mikey didn't analyze people; Raph had too much to deal with working himself out; Master Splinter had always told Donnie the same things about himself: don't be afraid, make yourself heard, use what you have to help your family. Leo saw the dark in him, and told him every once in a while, but not often; this was a source of unresolvedness between them. Donatello did not enjoy feeling so exposed in front of Leo, nor in front of April for that matter, especially because he did not always believe he could see through them equally as clearly. When this small layer of his own delusions fell away—when he ceased being the eyes behind the invisible glass, seeing but unseen—a chill ran through him, telling his brain two very different yet thoroughly instinctual things: run away or *do* something. This time, as he usually did, he chose the latter, and picked up the DNA profile again.

"You should… um, take a look, at the mother's DNA specs. They're extremely interesting—quite a discovery really, though perhaps an anomaly." As he spoke, his voice grew in confidence. *Anomaly* . *DNA* . *Discovery* . Such an easy flow to slip back into, such a beautiful set, a ballet that ensued of prescript words. An alcove for the brain.

Mikey had finally got the girl laughing from the spinning, going clockwise before suddenly turning in the other direction and making them both so dizzy that he finally stumbled backwards into the couch. He and Lizzie landed in a huge heap.

"Whoa. That was awesome—but I swear I can feel the earth actually revolving," Mikey said, looking up at the ceiling."

Lizzie was a pile of clean clothes with her legs over the back of the couch, staring up as well. "That be—um, is…um—that was fun…" she managed, smiling contentedly. "Dizzy… Mikey, dizzy?" It was more words than she'd uttered all day, but Mikey didn't seem surprised in the least.

"Majorly, dudette. Havin' an argument with the pizza, actually. But I usually win."

April and Donnie shook their heads from the entrance to the alcove, and Donnie smiled at his brother's antics. Mikey was ever content to put his pride to the side and be the fool for others should the need arise. He made it look so easy.

"How do you do it, Mikey? You can just look like an idiot for the edification of others."

Mikey scoffed. "Says the guy who wears those dumb goggles all the time. I swear, the ladies up on Fifth Avenue would, like, call the police on you for that."

Donatello laughed. "Paying no attention at all to the fact that I'm a five foot turtle who can talk and do discreet mathematics."

" *So* not even joking," Mikey said, with the utmost seriousness. "The police. Or the National Guard. You can imagine what they do to *me* ."

April made a mock-frightened face at Donnie where Mikey couldn't see them, and picked up the specs on the murdered woman. "I wish we had the information for this woman, to find out if she had any family for Lizzie to go to. Did she have any identification at all?"

"Nothing. If she did, the Foot took it."

April licked her lips, then walked quietly to intercept Lizzie's view of the ceiling. The girl watched her blankly.

"Lizzie—I know this might seem hard, but at least your mother's name"—

Lizzie shook her head fervently. "If I don't say nothing, they won't want me dead. Kay?"

Donnie almost dropped the specs; Mikey's eyes had grown wide, watching her from his relative position. April swallowed.

"So—you did see something you weren't supposed to see. But they didn't experiment on you?"

Lizzie drew her lips inside her mouth, furthering the image of a skeleton, and squinting savagely at the ceiling.

"Hey, April…" Mikey said, tentatively yet somehow firm, knowing that in some way he had the last word. "Maybe you should give it a break for now, huh?"

April nodded, surprised. "Yeah. Of course." She then moved back to look in Donnie's microscope at the partially degraded tissue samples he'd collected—things tended to break down more quickly in the sewers.

"I'm going to have to refrigerate these," Donnie introspected. "But Leo and Raph will murder me if I put them in the fridge, and I don't have a secondary cooling unit."

"Send Mikey up for dry ice, and make an insulated box," April said. "That's the only thing I can think of, really. You won't be able to keep them for long."

"I know," Donnie said, "But they're just so interesting. How often does one come across a mutation of this caliber in a lifetime?"

April laughed. "Other than looking in the mirror?"

While she examined the strange lymphocytes under the microscope, the sound of the door opening into the den disturbed her from her

thoughts. Donnie stepped out of the alcove, while Mikey looked sideways off the couch at the entrants.

"Holy… crap," Mikey said, sounding like he was in utter disbelief. "*What* happened to *you* two?"

Donatello dropped the specs he was holding as well as his goggles, as Leo and Raph stumbled in on each other's shoulders. It was uncertain who was supporting whom; after they got in the door and looked around for a moment, out of breath, they jointly took two steps, jointly drooped, and, at last, jointly fell on the ground. They were both caked with blood—their own and each other's—as well as pearls of sweat and grime. The two massive gashes on Leo's right shoulder were oozing yellow-white pus, bacteria-ridden and mixed fervently with red. A somewhat cleaner wound on Raphael's face continued to bleed, even though the wounds must have been more than an hour old; he looked drawn and pale from blood loss, gasping for oxygen.

Donnie looked between them, evidently unsure who to deal with first; Raph pointed to Leo, who, seeming to see Donnie's indecision, shoved his brother's shoulder away from him to reveal his shell.

"Dammit, Raphael!" Donatello said, as he dragged him to his feet and started leading him to the table. "Can't I go five minutes without having to sew you back together again? You're like the damn Scarecrow!"

Mikey, who was on his feet, and helping Leo the best he could towards the table, scoffed weakly. "Uh—more like Humpty-Dumpty, dude. That is gonna take some major shellacking. Huh-huh—get it?" His older brothers each sent him a dirty look, except Raphael, who chuckled weakly, feeling stupid and light-headed enough to find his baby brother funny. His eyes connected with the small brown ones looking over the back of the couch at him.

"Hey, Lizzie—what's the haps? Can I still be Han Solo?" he asked gesturing to his slashed face. "Or is it Frankenstein now?"

Lizzie vaulted over the back of the couch, just as April appeared from the dark alcove, watching gently. The little girl drew, in small spurts, closer to Raphael, her ball of clothing swaying around her. Donnie looked up from examining his brother's heavily cracked shell. Lizzie bit her lip as she drew close enough to touch one dry spot on Raph's face, and see into his eyes that watched out from that mask of blood.

"After the carbonite," she said, decidedly, and sat down, very resolutely, slightly under the table and near his chair.

Raphael remained staring fixedly at the spot where she had been, and on instinct his brothers went about busying themselves; Leo sat and directed Mikey in getting hot water and rags, April quickly looked for rubbing alcohol or other astringents, Donnie measured the blades and the length buried in the shell, while Raph's eyes filled, this time not with blood, but with salt water. There were times in his life when that war that he made of his existence created of him an inner monster—now he looked like one as well. It crushed down on him, like the metal *youkai* .

Donnie took a deep breath behind him. "Well, little brother… from the width and thickness of the blades, I'd say you've got a good five inches wedged in there. A little more and you'd probably be paralyzed. Good job."

"Hey," Leo said shortly. "Just leave him alone about it, okay?"

The teapot whistled, and April and Mikey began cleaning Leo's wounds properly.

April shook her head. "Leo… these're infected ten ways from Sunday —what on earth were you guys *doing* ?"

"Twin blades, dude," Mikey said. "Definitely not a sparring match with Raph. His aim's not this good, anyway."

Donnie went to his alcove for a moment; when he returned, Leo stood abruptly.

"And you are *not* thinking about giving him a shot!" Leo reprimanded, as his brother returned with a syringe. Donnie sighed.

"It's a *pain killer* —have you even seen his shell? I've gotta take the blades out, and he's gonna be in a world of pain without this; the blades hit flesh, and the whole crack's putting pressure on the wounds."

Raph gritted his teeth. "Just do it. Get it over with."

Leo looked panicked. "But, Raph, he"—

"It's my decision, Leo! *My* shell!" Raph asserted.

Donnie smiled somewhat triumphantly at Leo, who was glaring blue murder at him, and deftly pricked his younger brother with the needle. Leonardo excused himself, and was promptly sick again outside the den, to chuckles from Don and Mikey.

He returned to see Raph slowly feeling the pain-killer kick in and Donatello preparing himself for the effort of pulling out each blade at the correct angle so as not to injure the tissue further.

"Okay, Raphi," he said, rubbing his hands together. "The first one's going to make you want to hurl, probably. On the second one… you might faint. Let's hope not. The whole crack will shift when I get them both out, but the pressure should come off the wounds. You'll feel a whole lot better when I'm done."

Raph chuckled. "Seein' as how Leo's got the hurlin' outta the way for me, the first one should be a cake-walk."

Lizzie held onto Raph's leg as though bracing him; April took Mikey's shoulder, who was watching in rather abject horror; Leo came forward, and took Raph's hand—his other one was gripping the table edge as he looked forward with that same insane focus he used in battle, grinding his teeth. Leo twisted a rag together tightly and put it between his jaws, receiving a grateful nod. Don placed his hands on

the first blade, set higher up, and further from the deepest part of the crack.

"Get ready—one"—

"Two"—Leo said, softly, crouching down to look into Raph's eyes, as he closed them tightly.

"THREE!"

Donatello yanked on the blade, bringing it sluicing out in one quick movement, and Raphael gripped Leo's hand so hard he was sure it would break—so Leo returned it, to remind him he was there. Raph yelled briefly into the bite, before breathing hard and visibly working to bring himself under control. Sweat made clean rivulets on his face as it ran through the dried blood, drops landing on his shoulders like rusty rainwater.

Donatello held his breath, examining the blade; it was clean, save the tip, which meant that the second one had done most of the damage; he dropped it in a tray for study, then placed his hand on the second one, feeling his brother start violently under him as he put pressure on it. Some force had been relieved from the shell, and blood ran more freely from between some of the cracks.

"Alright, little brother. Just… just close your eyes, okay?"

Raph took the rag out of his mouth and nodded; Donatello passed a glance to Leo, who readied himself.

"I'm taking it out on three, Raphi—one…. Two…."

Raphael did not scream; he made little more noise than a breathless, choking half-gasp when his eyes opened, as in surprise from someone shoving him from behind. His body tensed; his face paled significantly, going somehow gray-green, and his pupils grew very, very small. His glance was on something unseen, as the eyes fogged over and he slumped forward in a dead faint, into Leo's arms.

There had been another tremendous cracking sound as the second blade came forth, this time of the shell momentarily growing round again from the tug; when the blade was gone, however, it collapsed; Donnie had seen the webbing of connective tissue underlying the dry exterior, and a maze of blood began trickling out, rolling through the various cracks and slashes in his brother's shell.

Lizzie got up when Raphael fainted, and went to Leo's side, as he got him onto his shoulder.

"Liz"—Leo said, grunting from the effort, "get a pillow and we'll situate him on the rug, huh?"

She saluted him and ran to do her task, making him smile; Leo then looked over at Mikey.

Michelangelo still had his hands fervently clapped in front of his eyes, and April was trying to coax them down.

"Mikey—he's okay, it's gonna be alright…"

"Ow…" was all Mikey could say, empathetically. "Ow, ow, ow!"

When Leo had gotten Raph safely onto the rug to come to, with Lizzie sitting cross-legged beside him, he came back to the kitchen, where Donnie was examining the second, rather blood-soaked and slightly dented blade. Mikey had retreated to sit on the stairs, shaking and looking very sick, and April had joined him there, in silent comfort.

"Well—it did him damage, but it's nice to see he did some back," Donatello mused, turning the blade to show how it was angled quite a bit to the right from one point of bend. "Explains why, even with the pain-killer, it hurt like hell." He smiled at Leo. "But let's get you sewed up now, huh?" and brandished a large sewing needle, making his elder brother stagger.

Leonardo, however, knowing he had no choice, sat down and squeezed his eyes shut, trying his hardest not to think of the pricking sensation and what it owed itself to; however, after a minute, he realized he felt nothing, and that Don had numbed the area completely for him. He breathed a sigh of relief. The entire room, however, seemed extremely cold—more so than the sewers ever did, and particularly the den. Despite this, however, he seemed to be growing sleepy, as though it were very warm and humid. Donatello felt his forehead, then his arms.

"Fever, big brother—you're infected, all right. Might end up being tetanus."

This, of course, translated to Leonardo as shots. He did not, however, have the energy to fight with it, now that Raph was safe and he had only to worry about his own ills; he could only pray to the ancestors or to the gods or the bodhisattvas or *Amida Butsu* himself that he would be blessedly *asleep* when Donnie started getting crazy with the needles. His eyes drooped, but he looked at Mikey for help.

"Mikey—little brother, *please* keep an eye on Don for me, huh?"

Michelangelo swallowed, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and rose to the occasion, joining them again at the table, while Leo began falling asleep. Mikey smiled at Donatello as if to say, " *Hey, if it makes him feel better…* " and Donatello didn't argue with the terms. He instead worked diligently and a bit sadly, preparing a strong tetanus shot, knowing he was in the proverbial doghouse, and wishing for his brother's trust more than he had ever had cause to his entire life—because he'd always had it, so naturally.

April came over, quietly, and used the hot rags to start mopping the blood from Leo's arms and shell. "I'm surprised they didn't get stuck together with all of this," she said, lightly. "Half of it's probably Raph's." She came upon the handcuff on Leo's left wrist and the severed chain, and glanced up at him. "There's one of these on Raphael's wrist, too."

Leo smiled, hazily, his eyes still closed. "I know. I put it there. It took a *bisento* to separate us."

Donatello frowned. "But— *why* ?"

Leonardo's temperature had risen, and he seemed somewhat out of it. "Hmm… tough love. Maybe by now the hothead's figured out that he's stuck with me." He then laughed, a bit hysterically. "I'm… I'm soaked in my brother's blood, aren't I?"

April squeezed out the very red rag pragmatically, and dipped it in hot water. "His and yours. I'd like to know how exactly you two managed to get like this."

"I was training him to work with me—I basically forced him to fight in tandem. Then the Foot came. We went to see Karai. There was this maze of death to get there and this metal demon thing. It slashed us both pretty good, then trapped us in an alcove. We almost had it down—but it had one more hit. Raph just turned around and took it, right in the shell. Like a maniac."

Donnie nodded; he was a middle brother too, and had a moment of understanding. "He stopped you from protecting him. Well I'll be damned."

Leo's feverish explanation stopped there, as he slipped further towards sleep. Don had finished with the stitches and April had gotten all the blood off him—after a compress and a sterile bandage, they stood him up and got him to his bed, listening to him mumbling incoherent sleep talk.

Lizzie remained cross-legged by Raph, and Mikey joined her, sitting on the couch. Together, they shared the understanding of the younger—to have one's fate taken from one's hands, to have to wrestle it free on occasion, to feel the free air. Raph began to stir from his faint, and his shell stirred with him. The pressure was gone, and the real pain was just beginning.

Tsubaki

Author's Note: It has been a week since a young man at Virginia Tech killed 32 peers and shortly thereafter, himself. I dedicate this chapter to those dead at Virginia Tech, whom the community here at UCLA now mourns, though we seem so far away. Cho Seung-hui, the killer, is a peer and a fallen brother to us all. I also dedicate this chapter to my big sisters, Laura and Michelle; I hope we four will raise your daughters to treat each other better than the way we sometimes treated each other. I love you both—you were always my heroes.

For two hours that felt like his life twice over, Leo had, for the second time in his existence, a set of fevered nightmares.

While in Japan, he had come across a grove of *tsubaki* , white camellia flowers on their evergreen trees, glossy leaves glinting in the sun. While hiding in the village, he'd overheard the women speaking of the blooming of this unlucky flower, and telling their children to beware the grove when the petals began to fall. He had not understood, but stumbled upon that grove as if drawn to it. Like many places during his travels, the grove was a spot of transcendent beauty, that reminded him of the fragility of the world he lived upon, and the ravages beset on it by man. He sat in the grove, and meditated for many hours, until a breeze, cold and unnatural, disturbed him. His meditations had led him home; as he looked around, he saw his brothers as children, long before they had ever picked up their ninja weapons, the way of Bushido, or the responsibility as protectors. He smiled to see Donnie answering first every time while Splinter conducted lessons, just a little faster than the rest of them; he saw Mikey, always with that sweet disposition, practicing his skateboard; he saw himself, even, leading them in games of tag and hide-and-go-seek.

He saw Raph, then, running between the camellia trees, and tried to call out to him, but his younger self was holding a hand over his

mouth. Raph raising his hand to give an answer in lessons, saying it wrong, and Donatello laughing before he corrected him; like a fast-forward line of film, Leo saw the progression, over the years, the little hand going up less and less, afraid to be wrong and afraid of the derision… until the day Splinter passed over Donnie's eager hand and looked at Raphael, who was sitting with his arms folded, refusing to give an answer. When he was firmly ordered to, he gave the wrong one, as though on purpose.

"Oh, come on—you know the answer!" Donnie had said, exasperated. "Don't be *stupid* , Raphael!"

And Raphael, between the camellia trees yet in the sewer den across the precipice of time, angrily shoving over his chair and leaving the lesson.

Leo tried to stand, but his younger self stood over him, commanding him to watch. He saw Mikey, then, out in the sewers playing where Splinter's eyes did not follow.

"Hey, Raphi, wanna hear a joke? What's green, purple, and slimy all over?"

"Um… I dunno, a frog?"

Mikey pointing, as though he saw one, and then dunking his brother's averted head quickly under a sewer drain, to the laughter of his brothers.

"Your *FACE* !"

Raphael flailing and trying to shove him away, ineffectually, with slime in his eyes. "That's not *funny* !"

And Mikey, innocent Mikey, backing away. "Yeah it was—it was just a joke, Raphi."

Raph turning to glare at his older brothers. "Stop *laughing* at me! Leo, *stop* !"

Then the fast-forward film again; hundreds of these "jokes," day after day, and a shrill, repetitive sound in the background, silvery and disturbing; Leo realized it was laughter—his own. He stared around, at the millions of Raphs, Mikeys, Donnies, and Leos, all different ages, running around under the *tsubaki* petals, teasing, bullying, beating up, getting in fights, boasting and bossing—Raphael, always, in the years before their ninja training, fighting tears and running off. Leo began to see that the flowers, rose-like, looked like heads; he recognized that he saw all these little things because he *had* seen them, so many years ago, and he had never done anything about them. He heard Raph's quiet voice, in an aside to Splinter, close to his ear.

"Master Splinter… I'm sorry, but I don't *like* the sai. They're too short."

"Shorter than what, my student?"

"Leo's swords. I wanna use swords too, Master. I swear I'll try my hardest."

Leo closed his eyes, over the tears.

"Ah, my student. You will see that the sai are the most difficult weapon to master, but when used properly, they can protect you against the longest and most powerful weapons—like the *ninjaken* , and the bo. They will make you strong, and I believe in your ability to use them well."

His younger self ran from him, shouting behind.

"C'mon, Raphi—hide-and-go-seek! We're all playing!"

And Raphael, as though for the first time, looked at him and said, "I don't want to."

His own little self, confused, running back and gripping Raph's arm, pulling him. "Aw, come on. We always have fun!"

"I don't like hide-and-seek. You guys go ahead."

Leo bit his lower lip as he saw, in the strange *tsubaki* meditation, his younger self tightening his grip.

" *Come on* , Raphi! Why can't you just play? Don't be such a baby!"

He saw little Raphael shove to get free of the grip, "Leggo a' me, Leo! I said I don't *wanna* !"

And himself shove back, making Raph fall hard on the sewer floor. They looked about six years old, and Raph's eyes had filled with tears.

"Aw, Raphi, don't cry—if Master Splinter finds out…" And at that point, little Leo seemed to have a revolutionary, panicked idea, standing up straight and folding his arms. " *Stop crying* ! Real ninjas don't cry, Raphi!"

Raphael forcefully swallowed his sob immediately, looking up at his big brother. "R-really?"

"Yeah. You never see *me* crying, do you?"

Leo heard Master Splinter's voice, somewhere behind him.

" *Someday, Leonardo, when you are old enough to understand how important your brother is to you—you will regret bullying Raphael* ."

Mikey's voice, seven years old. "My hero's Superman!"

Donatello, "Steven Hawking is way cooler, Mikey. How 'bout you, Leo?"

"Mine? Well, I loved reading Basho, and the Bakumatsu writers, too. But I dunno… I think Master Splinter'll always be *my* hero." His little

self, looking back at Raph, who was trailing behind them. "Raph?"

That open face for a moment, gazing at him, then looking away abruptly. "N-nobody…"

Donnie falling back and putting an arm around Raph's shoulders. "He's just jealous 'cause you already said his, Leo," Don teased, good-naturedly, and Raph shrugging him off.

"Stop being a know-it-all, Donnie. You don't know anything."

Master Splinter's voice, hovering there again, a pressure on the back of Leo's head. " *What is worse, my son—the sound of a joke from an innocent mouth, or the sound of laughter from a knowing one? You should guide your brothers and protect them… you may feel separate from them, but you must remember that I shall not always be here. Someday, they will look to you, Leonardo* ."

Toddlers, he and Raphael. Twins, inseparable, indiscernible. Raph sneaking down to Leo's bunk when he was afraid of the dark. Raph holding his hand when he needed a shot, helping him if he fell. His brother Raphael. Never good at anything in particular—never at jokes so much as Mikey, never with gadgets so much as Donnie, never at leading so much as Leo. A nurse to sick rats and pigeons. Then Master Splinter's voice to his young self, echoing into forever.

" *Guide your brother, Leonardo; Raphael will always be yours to guard. Show your brother the compassion you are capable of feeling, and lend him your strength* ."

And coming from this, a sense of pride, yes, a wish to do right and be like his adopted father… but behind this, a strange conflict, a nagging sense.

Resentment, perhaps. Leo had not felt it in so long.

A fight, when they were ten, and Leo coming out on top after throwing Raph into the muddy sewage, to gales of laughter from

Mikey and Donnie, then trying to help him out.

"I don't want your help!" yelling a furious, humiliated Raph, hands balled into fists, sending trapped, betrayed tears out through his words. "I wish you'd just *disappear* !"

And the mirroring look of heartbreak on both of their faces, reflected back at each other—the way Mikey and Donnie's laughter suddenly died. Raphi couldn't make Leo cry; but he'd come close.

An alligator trying to eat Mikey, and Raph too weak to stop it before Leo and Donnie show up—Leo organizing and holding it down, while Donnie uses his smarts to immobilize it. Berating Raphael for not acting quickly, and watching an emerging, mirrored conflict in his eyes that had made Leo feel a kind of rough, dark satisfaction. The sound of his brother, night after night, bench-pressing the gentleness out of himself, watching walls fixedly, that insane focus.

The fast-forward and backward films lanced across the head-shaped flowers, the beginnings of their training: footwork, meditation, weapons practice—and at last the day Raphael got Don's bo tangled up in his sai and flipped him over savagely on his back, choking him with his own wooden staff, and sitting on his shell, with a twisted smile.

" *Now* who's stupid, huh Donnie?"

Raphael as a pre-teen, watching up through the grids to the streets above, closing his eyes as fresh air finds him, when he thinks he is alone. Mimicking the Brooklyn sounds of the tough street detritus, walking in tune to rap music beats, struggling to express something restless, something stirring, trapped within his eyes. That new swaggering confidence, the shrugged antipathy, the way he watches his brothers, and becomes both menace and comfort, like a fire, walking the line between wild and domesticated.

Leo saw years pass; the light over the grove changed and shifted a million times, and his own voice, passing over the precipice, doubled

by time.

"Get out of here 'til you can control yourself, Raphael!"

"Why can't you just work with us, Raphael?"

"What's *wrong* with you, Raphael?"

…And deadly words, too.

"Go ahead! We don't *need* you!"

"I'm *better* than you."

"You're an embarrassment."

…And his brother's voice, as though it had always been there, a whisper in his ear.

" *What's wrong with me ?*"

Leo found himself alone again, among the camellia flowers; the light had turned gray; the sun was gone; the petals no longer seemed white, and a sigh, a cold breeze, passed over them, like the hand of death. There was a presence behind him; he heard metal clunking and clinking, the sounds of the metal *youkai* , but as it stepped around and stood above him, and Leo passed his eyes up over the form, he felt a different shiver move through his body.

Nightwatcher .

The black-gray glove held out a helping hand to lift him up; he could not see the face behind the mask. Very slowly, Leo reached up to take off the helmet.

His brother's six-year-old face scowled back at him, in the immense, overwhelming suit.

"Why are you cryin', Leo? Real ninjas don't cry, remember?"

The breeze blew hard around his shell, and Leonardo whirled at it, looking around the empty grove—the Nightwatcher had gone, yet the *tsubaki* were trembling, as though the branches were being shaken by a great, invisible force.

All at once, the petals fell away from their stalks—a million flowers exploded away from the stems, remaining often as little round skulls, hitting the ground like rolling heads. Death came to the grove. Leonardo gasped at the beauty and the terror of it, the quick, reaper's judgment. His was a wonderful and lovely world; but the ugliness of it came in a flower's disguise. Red Death in a white rose.

Leonardo had been woken from this meditation by the cold breeze; the *tsubaki* lay in white piles around him. The sun had returned, and the grove had been entirely empty. His cheeks, however, were wet. It occurred to him that this was not the meditation he had had in Japan, on his pilgrimage, and something was very wrong indeed. The first time, when he had truly seen the *tsubaki* , he had vaguely understood the meaning of the falling heads, but had left bewildered; now, in this new meditation, as though visiting from the grave, the true lesson he should have taken from that day made itself known to his sleeping, fevered mind. The petals flew backward, landing again on their stalks; green and white traded places; his brother's faces were all around him, heads waiting to be guillotined away. A small Raph and a small Leo, perhaps five, ran between the camellias.

"C'mon, Raphi, don't be a scaredy-turtle!" his little self yelled, watching behind him as his younger brother lagged. He tripped suddenly and went sprawling, and Raph trotted forward.

"Leo, you okay? Does it hurt?"

" *No* . I'm fine." His younger self, however, appeared to be holding back tears.

"You're bleedin'! Lemme help you"—

"I'm *fine* ! And don't go telling Master Splinter or I'll *never* play with you again!"

Little Leo pushed away a small Raphael, and stumbled to his feet, swallowing sobs with a tremendous effort. His younger brother seemed at a complete loss.

"I'm sorry, Leo."

"Why? It was *my* fault," Leo heard himself say, dismissively. "Stop acting like such a baby. C'mon—follow the leader!" And hobbled off, leaving Raphael to follow slowly, trailing a stick listlessly in the sewer water.

The *tsubaki* fell a million times, trapping Leo in an endless loop. He couldn't stand; a net or a web lay tangled around his feet and legs; something soft and damp seemed to be wrapping around his head, muffling him and threatening to suffocate him. The cold breeze returned, stronger now, yet for the first time he felt glad of it; he realized he was dying from the heat suddenly, choked by it, surrounded.

"Leo!"

He heard the voice, but could not find the owner among the falling and reemerging camellia.

"Raph—I didn't mean—ninjas *do* , Raphi—even ninjas—I didn't mean it…"

"Leo, wake up!"

The breeze was firmly on his forehead, then it moved to his cheek; Leo knew he must still be meditating, and concentrated on his eyelids. Yes, his eyelids. He had to make them open.

"I'm the one who couldn't… I understand… I'm so sorry…"

He heard himself saying this, as from far away, as though listening to someone else speak, and realized his eyes had opened. He was in his bunk; he could see the planks of Raph's bed just above him, and spied the hand of its owner—a right hand, still wearing a handcuff, swabbing his face with a cold rag. Leo realized his fever must have broke, as he saw Raphael sitting in a chair beside his bed; for the first time, he looked into his brother and saw him as he'd been, over eleven years earlier… the gentleness and the empathy he'd once had, that had once been his strength—that he perhaps still had, that hid until certain moments. As when Lizzie came into his life.

"Raph, I"—

"Don't worry. It was just fever ramblin'. I won't tell anyone you were talkin' in your sleep or anythin'." Raph said, avoiding his eyes, with his tough, low voice.

Leonardo felt it pulling at his insides; the vivid dream was trying to escape, to slip away, one *tsubaki* petal at a time, out of his head.

"No—no, I have to tell you. I have to… when I was… I went to Iceland, then Portugal, then Mongolia, then Japan… I have to tell you about it, Raph… I was dripping in human traffickers' blood, and captured by poachers, spit on, soaked in whiskey and called an animal—they had Moroccan children in the hold, Raph, to be sold to adults… I've never been so disgusted with the world… and then… then… the *tsubaki* … I wish… *Ore wa shinitai da yo* !" He felt himself beginning to slip, but for the look of understanding on his brother's face. Leo did not realize he'd fallen into the Japanese he'd used before the Ninja Council and the Ancient One. They, too, had been dressed like the metal *youkai* . "Little brother… *kimi ni ai suru* … please, believe me… *Comprende… yo soy* …"

"Leo, for the love of Pete, will you *stop* ?" Raph said, scooting the chair closer and trying to soak up the sweat on his brother's forehead. "It's okay—you're gonna be fine. We're both okay, ya got me?"

Leo gulped, trying to see clearly. Raphael's face, even in the dim light, was free of blood, but not of disfigurement; the lower gash spanned from below his mask on the left side to the top of his neck on the right, and was held together by dozens of small, precise stitches. "Your shell—how is it?"

Raph turned; Donnie had done a good job reconstructing most of it—though the actual shape of the crack would remain, the conclave had been corrected; he had made it mostly round again, plastering the cracks together and cleaning the dried blood out so the connective tissue beneath could heal in the right formation. Raph's body would have to take care of the internal damage as best it could, but Leo smiled to see the renewed shape nevertheless. He felt his eyes growing wet, and Raph returning with the towel; his brother seemed to be avoiding looking directly at him.

"So… bad dreams, huh?" Raphael asked, putting another pillow under him. He seemed to be at a total loss.

"I dreamt about… about someone I loved, dying… very slowly, over a long time," Leo whispered, forcing Raph to come closer. "Someone who was… compassionate, and quiet, and really gentle with everyone. Who I wanted to be like, as I grew up, without meaning to… and only ended up hurting."

If Raphael had a guess as to who this person was or how Leo knew them, he didn't voice it; he continued dripping cool water on his brother's brow, trying to bring his temperature down.

"Bro… about what I said, in that meetin' with Karai"—

"What did you say?" Leo asked, slowly, trying to bring the conversation to mind. It did not seem very important, backlit against the dream of the camellia flowers.

"Just… everything. I'm… I just… I didn't mean to *embarrass* you… I guess, maybe you were right—I'm too close to Lizzie to see things clearly."

Leo stared for a moment, uncomprehending; then, at last, he laughed, humorlessly. " *Embarrass* me? After everything… after all those tests, and taking the blades in your shell…? I don't… I don't know if I *care* , Raph. Not right now."

Raphael's hand was quivering; he stood up abruptly, and had to grab his bunk frame to stop from falling over when the light-headedness hit him. He paced the room for a minute, before punching the wall, savagely; he did the same to the frame of Mikey's bunk, making an incoherent sound of frustration.

"What's wrong, Raph?" Leo asked, not hearing himself. He realized he already knew, yet some deep—dark—part of himself wanted Raph to *say* it, to stand in front of him and be weak.

"I—I *hate* this, Leo! I hate doing this stupid dance with you, every damn day—just accept my apology! I can't handle it anymore!"

Leo genuinely felt compassion stirring back up within himself. They were like two continents, speaking separate languages. "Can't handle what?"

Raph slumped back into the chair, worn out, on several different levels. He resumed dripping water on his brother's forehead.

"I don't know. I just… Why does everythin' have to be such a struggle?"

"I wish I had all the answers, Raph… I wish I was a god, like the kids in Portugal thought I was when I saved them… with enough power to enact change, and be truly selfless. But I'm not. I'm just… just Leo. I don't know why life is such a struggle. I don't even know why I do half of the things I do, or did. I dreamt about so many of them… so many failures, and so many mistakes… so many stupid little things I could have stopped, or made better, if I'd only been a little more… more like…" He felt his eyelids growing heavy again, and Raph's hand on his forehead.

"Leo—Leo, stay with me! You're heatin' up again—open your eyes!"

Raph shook him gently, watched as Leo's eyes slipped half-open, watching him blearily.

"Why won't you let me do the right thing? Why do I always have to be the monster?" Raph asked, letting the words tumble out, now that his brother seemed so much more mortal, so much less the great and powerful Leonardo that he had been growing up.

Leo shook his head. "No… no, little brother. The *tsubaki* … just don't let me go back there, Raphi… It isn't fair… I'm so tired of watching you die…"

And for the first time in his life, Raphael actually saw his elder brother weep.

Reference Notes: *Kimi ni ai suru* : "I love you" in the familial affectionate sense. *Ore wa shinitai da yo* : roughly, "I want to be dead!" in a strong sense. "Go ahead! We don't need you!" is a quotation from the 1989 *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* movie; "I'm better than you" is from the 2007 *TMNT* movie; "What's wrong with me?" is a quote both from the 2003 *TMNT* TV show, season one: episode four "Meet Casey Jones," and from the 1984 stand-alone TMNT comic *Raphael: Me, Myself, and I* by Peter Laird and Kevin Eastman. Leonardo's lines to Raphael about his travels reference events from the *Leonardo* movie prequel comic from the notes of writer-director Kevin Munroe. This chapter in memoriam was written while listening to "Prelude" by Globus, which I highly recommend. Thanks again to my think-tank friend, Gadoken King, for reading this chapter and all its permutations, and to readers and reviewers like you.

Twin Disappear

Leo's fever broke at least two more times that night; each time, Raph was awake with a small light beside him in the chair, keeping his vigil. The second time, Leo's eyes wandered around, his ears straining to hear all those breathing sounds of his brothers at rest. Donnie's snores and slight whimpers; Mikey saying little words in between sighs and snorts; Raph catnapping with his deep, steady heaves, straining against the plaster to utilize his diaphragm, and one open eye on Leo as his brother stirred.

"Hey, big bro. Go back to sleep, huh?" Raph would say, and redampen a rag to wipe his brother's sweat-soaked face. Leo would spy Lizzie's hair coming over as she peeked down at him from Raph's bunk where she'd been tucked in, and Raph would gesture to her to get back up there.

When Leo awoke in the morning—i.e. Don's dim solar light simulator came on in the corner of the room and lit up one wall—Mikey and Donnie's bunks were empty, as they'd both gone to work. Leonardo reflected, looking down at his blanket, and his brother asleep on folded arms, sprawled forward out of the chair onto the edge of Leo's bed, like that protective fire; 24 hours ago, he'd dragged his brothers out of bed and into the sewers for intensive training, after working all night in the shop with Raph. Now an orphaned ten-year-old slept four feet above him, and Raphael was scarred for life. He found himself staring at his brother's sleeping face, haunted by half-complete nightmare images and the impression of camellia flowers like flashes of light on the backs of his eyes. He found he hated the slashes, the way they stood between himself and Raph, between the face of his little brother and Leo's mind.

Leonardo placed a hand on Raphael's shoulder, and stirred him slightly as to wake him; but, when he was unsuccessful, remained content with the contact, however minor, wondering how much he deserved it. His brother was so docile in this state, his expression

gentle; his entire skull seemed to have different shape, the intense glares and permanent frown and maniacal focus gone, wiped away. He almost wanted to peel the ninja mask away as well, to remember that face as a child, but he could not peel the slashes back, or the stitches, or the time.

When Leo awoke again after dozing off in his musings, Raph was holding the damp rag back on his brother's forehead, wide awake.

"Hey, Leo—ya ready for some breakfast? Don says you'll need energy for that fever a' yours."

Leo smiled. "Where's Liz?"

"Out in the kitchen helpin'—not sure what Donnie's thrown together, but we better get out there before he puts somethin' dangerous in it. I told Lizzie to inform us of any suspicious-lookin' vials or bottles."

Leo chuckled, sitting up. "She hasn't seen proper food in forever—she'll probably report the milk cartons."

Raph leaned over and started helping him; Leo almost waved him away, but refrained, on an almost instinctual thought. What good would it really do, to let his brother watch helpless as he struggled—what could it prove, what could it damage? They both did it; he wondered which of them had done it first.

"Um… was I rambling last night?" Leo asked, as he got to his feet; he heard the handcuffs clink against each other.

Raph watched him carefully. "Not too bad. Other languages, mostly. I didn't know you knew so many, bro… I won't tell the guys or anythin', if you're worried."

Leo smiled. "I didn't think you would, Raph. Even though you have every right to sit back and watch Mikey make fun of me."

Raph's slashed face betrayed little, and he remained quiet, leading Leo out of the bunk room. The smell of coffee assaulted them immediately, and the sound of Donnie having a rather heated altercation with a customer.

"Look, for the last time, I am *not* a psychic! The psychic hotline you're looking for is 1-800-555- *D-A-W-N* -HELP, not D-O-N! Learn to spell and have a great day!"

In his distraction, Donnie failed to notice Lizzie sneaking a cup of coffee; as she wandered by focusing on it, Raph deftly lifted it out of her hands with one arm.

"Nice try, kiddo. Rule of this house is no coffee 'til at least fourteen," he said, half-laughing, handing the cup to Leo and getting him into a chair. It seemed the customer was not willing to let Donnie off the hook so easily.

"Oh, you want to speak to my supervisor? Here, let me transfer you." Donnie made a sarcastic beeping sound. "Hello, ma'am, I'm Donnie, Donnie's supervisor. We don't do Tarot card readings, and if you wanna know the truth, spending your time on unproven, superstitious hocus-pocus doesn't exactly help your case that you're not an idiot!"

Leo snorted into his coffee; he never got tired of Donnie's hotline calls, no matter how banal. Mikey wandered by; he was attempting to glue the oversized, fake zipper to the front of his shell, but for some reason he had already put the head on and couldn't seem to accomplish the task. Leo tried to get up to help him, but Raph waved at him to sit.

"Mikey, you dipstick—lemme see it!" Raph said, grabbing the glue from him. "What're you doin' with the head on?"

Mikey's voice echoed slightly inside the head. "Donnie's surveillance camera's malfunctioning—I'm testing it out while the compu's runnin' diagnostics or somethin'." He whirled a giant, squeaking nunchaku

that sounded like a dog toy. "The new sonar device isn't working either. Can't go to my gig 'til it's up."

Donnie finally got off the line and flung his headset on the table. "I haven't had nearly enough coffee for crazies like that!" he exclaimed, taking a desperate gulp from his mug. Mikey laughed.

"You've had, like, three pots, dude—in the last hour."

Raph finished gluing on the zipper and went towards the coffee pot himself, but found Donatello's bo coming between he and the caffeine.

"Hey—what's the big idea? I make *you* coffee every mornin'."

Donnie ushered his brother back towards the table. "In case you hadn't noticed, you're still hopped up on pain killers, and I'm not too interested in seeing what happens when we mix those with caffeine, little brother."

"I am *not* ," Raph denied, sitting down.

"Oh, yes you are. I gave you enough to get you through the night—in a couple hours, you're gonna be in a world of hurt. In case you forgot, your shell was crushed last night."

Lizzie sat down beside Raph, now with a cup of milk, and he nodded at her approvingly. He glanced at the pile of pancakes. "Pst—Liz, what's in these?"

She looked up. "Two cups Krusteez boxed mix, one teaspoon vanilla extract, two cups filtered water, a half-cup canned, drained blueberries, and a tablespoon of butter," she recited. "And three dashes cinnamon powder."

Raph chuckled, Mikey—who'd taken the head off to eat—grinned, and both Leo and Donnie stared.

"Whoa," Leo said, under his breath.

"Narc," Donnie said, smiling. "So, Raphi, your little spy has a photographic memory. How'd you figure that out?"

"Trainin' her yesterday," Raph said, forking a couple pancakes. "I may be a brute vigilante, but I ain't stupid."

Donnie sat down as well, taken aback. "Whatever you say, Raph—no one said you were."

Leo focused on his pancakes, troubled by a vague *déjà vu* .

"Pancakes're great, by the way," Raph said, his tone of voice not changing—matter-of-fact, and flippant, denying all deeper meaning.

Mikey began rolling his pancakes into burritos. "Cool—check it out, Raph. New patent idea." As he did this, Lizzie watched intently, and began to do the same. "Kid fits it well, dudes."

Raph gave a half-grin. "Yeah—that reminds me. April was here last night. What'd she say 'bout the whole thing?"

Donnie sighed and glanced at Leo, who gestured at him to take the cake. "I'm not playing bad cop this early in the morning," he said, and returned to his coffee, making Donatello roll his eyes.

"Fine. She said Lizzie should stay here 'til no one's after her anymore. Then April's gonna take her up to foster services for us, since we don't have her mother's name to look for any relatives."

"Yeah, we do," Leo perked up. "It's one thing we got out of Karai last night—after Raph's cavalier attitude."

"Hey—I said I was sorry. I shouldn't've gone in there, and I toldja so, too. What more d'ya want?"

Leo sighed. "You're perfectly capable of being polite, Raphael. I just wish I could get you to respect me enough to actually do it. And there was no way I could have just left you with those Foot medics."

Raph shook his head. "Man, you gotta trust me to take care a' myself sometimes, Leo. No wonder Karai acted like I was some little kid—my own brother seems to think he has to hold my hand the whole way. Last night had nothin' to do with my respect for you, and *everythin* ' to do with Karai's respect *for us* ."

Leo scoffed. "Yeah—her lack of respect because I can't seem to control my own loud-mouthed little brother."

Donnie held up his hands. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. I thought you guys got through all the tests together? Why would Karai expect you to control Raph when you couldn't have got there without him?"

"Thanks, Donnie," Raph said, taking a pointed bite of pancake and sounding vindicated.

"You're supposed to back me up, here," Leo hissed at Donatello, who shrugged.

"Sounds like Karai was playing you guys off each other. If you got each other's backs through the tests, you should've done the same thing when you talked to her. Now she knows your weakness as a leader, big brother."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Leo asked, somewhat belligerently.

"Sometimes, you don't listen," Donnie said, slowly and not accusingly. "And that goes double for Raph."

Raphael didn't deny it, but grabbed another pancake, smiling. Seldom had Donatello ever taken his side of a debate; it felt good to have the reasoning brother in his corner for once. Mikey remained quiet, he and Lizzie both watching the exchange, troubled and slightly bewildered. Mikey poured the kid some orange juice while she grabbed another pancake for him, in silent agreement.

Leo sighed. "What—so all this is my fault? That's just what I thought."

Raph chimed up. "All what? We're fine, Leo—stop beatin' yourself up over nothin'. We got there, even though you lost the key to these stupid handcuffs—we survived, we got some info, even though I acted like a moron—no harm, no foul."

Leo shook his head. "You just don't get it, do you? You're not the big brother. I shouldn't have expected you to get it."

Raphael laughed a bit. "Get what? Look, I know I lost my temper on Karai last night and made you look bad, and *I'm sorry* . And I wouldn't say I'm sorry if I didn't have any respect for ya—so gimme a break."

Leo gritted his teeth. "You're my little brother. I should have taught you respect by now. I've been training with you all this time, and we still can't work together on that basic level, because I cannot seem to guide you correctly. I keep failing, even when you ask me for my help. So what kind of brother am I?"

Raphael watched him in disbelief, then laughed, and got up. He began to walk, restlessly, in the living room.

"Uh-oh," Mikey said, under his breath. "Major uh-oh." Donnie nodded in agreement, placing a tired hand over his eyes. Leo got up and followed his unraveling brother.

"Does it ever end?" Donatello asked rhetorically, pouring more coffee.

"Raph"—Leo began, sounding as though he were going to confess something, but Raph cut him off.

"I… will not be… your personal failure. You got me, Leo?" he asked, turning around, with that trapped, stirring demon behind his eyes, speaking slowly and deliberately, sounding very different. "You don't

get to blame yourself for my stupid decisions. You don't get to take responsibility for what I say or what I do."

Leo shook his head, appearing noble—great and powerful Leonardo, again that immortal and unassailable force he had been growing up, his vulnerability gone with the fever. "When an adult makes a mistake, Raphael—when a leader makes a mistake, even if he doesn't intend for anything to happen—he takes responsibility. What you do *reflects on me* . It doesn't matter who made the decision. It still falls on my shoulders. No excuses."

"Don't confuse bein' the leader with bein' my *brother* ," Raph said, his voice lower. "I asked for your help because you're my brother. I stick by you because you're my brother. I follow you because you're my brother. I protect you because you're my brother. I don't do anythin' outta some weird ideal a' you bein' my General or somethin'. We're not like the Foot, Leo—we don't run things like they do. You can't just forget that 'cause Karai seems all honorable t' you."

Donnie looked at Mikey, one eyebrow ridge raised. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Mikey, in his turn, pushed a bowl of Mallows towards him.

"Marshmallow?"

"Marshmallow," Donnie shrugged. They both glanced at Lizzie, who now sat between them, drinking her juice. He pushed the bowl her way. "Marshmallow?"

She took one, tucked it into her mouth, and gave a thumbs up. "'mallow," she agreed, and the brothers grinned.

"She does fit in pretty well," Donnie chuckled.

"Yeah, well—none of that helps in front of the Foot clan, Raph," Leo said. "You're too simple-minded to at least pretend? You couldn't be pragmatic, and use your manners, and do what I say—even once?"

Raphael scoffed. "Oh, I'm simple-minded now too, huh? That's right. Stupid, simple-minded, vigilante brute Raphael, who's good fer nothin' but bein' the muscle, right?" The monster intensified behind his eyes. "I understand manners better 'in you think, Leo. We got through those tests as *equals* . If Karai disrespects me, she's disrespectin' *you* , and that actually *pisses* me off. You don't get to just reverse positions outta nowhere when the fight's over, and take responsibility for me, or my actions. You shoulda took the hint when I threw that battle, but ya don't *get it* , Leo. I threw that battle 'cause I knew I could stay there and handle myself, while you talked to Karai. An' you refused it. I admitted you were better fer the job, an' you wouldn't *take* it! How can I follow ya when you refuse t' let me? It's like ya think you have to force me t' do it before I'm really followin' you—but it's always *my* decision!"

Leo shook his head slowly. "No—no, Raph—you had no choice, that whole time. It's an illusion if you think you did. That's why it's all my fault. Just let me take responsibility. It doesn't *have* to be a struggle."

Raphael worked his jaw, behind the horrid slashes. "No. I don't want you to take responsibility f'me. The thing is, y'can only take responsibility if I give it to you, an' I *don't* . You don't get to decide. None of it. It's my life—you're my big brother, Leo, but my life is *my* responsibility. You don't get to decide what I do, what I say—it's not yer fault, or yer problem, unless I *ask* fer help. Ya have no control over any of it. You can't decide how I live—and Leo, ya can't decide how or when I'm gonna die." He had his arms out, frankly; the monster was gone behind his eyes, leaving only a slight sadness, as though while speaking he had come to truly understand something.

… *yours to protect…*

Leonardo didn't know why he did what he did next; he knew only that Raphael had hurt him, badly, and he wanted very suddenly to hurt him back. He reached into a small declivity made in his belt, normally used for a hidden shuriken, and threw its contents at Raph's feet, standing still and silent, resentful and not entirely understanding why.

Raphael stared at the tiny item, blinking; his response showed that he could not manage, or refused, to understand its significance, and made Leonardo feel instant regret, and wish he could just take it back. Mikey and Donnie craned their necks to see. Glinting on the floor was a tiny, silver, unassuming handcuff key.

"Where'd you find it?" Raph asked, looking back at Leo, perplexed.

For a moment, Leo's heart ached, and he considered going along with his brother's somehow innocent assumption—Raph, of all people, innocent about something, still trusting in a thread so basic that had been broken without his knowledge. But he knew he couldn't keep it up if he lied.

"I… I never *lost* it, Raph," Leo said, his voice breaking unexpectedly.

Raph continued to have trouble grasping it, the struggle on his face asking Leo for a kind explanation. "So… so you had it with you the whole time—you just forgot where ya put it?" he asked, subconsciously taking a step backward, after leaning to pick up the tiny, insignificant object.

Leonardo found that his own hands were trembling. This little thing; this little decision—so small, so fathomless. *Tsubaki* .

" *No* , Raph," Leo whispered, unable to raise his voice any higher, lest it carry a sob. "Like I said… I gave you no choice."

Raph was staring at the key, down in one hand, a dumbfounded, helpless expression all over his disfigured face.

"This's what those nightmares were 'bout…" Raph whispered, almost inaudible. He said nothing else about them, unwilling to betray what his brother had said during his fevers.

"I guess… I was just afraid, that you'd leave me there. You didn't want to go… and I knew, as long as we were connected, that I could

protect you, and nothing bad would happen to you. But I forgot… how fiercely you could protect *me* ," Leo said.

Raphael looked into the key, its small, semi-reflective surface; into his brother's eyes, and the way he refracted back, a distorted mirror, cracked glass, twins separated forever, his own face, twisted, monster-like, behemoth—ugly. The hand holding the key became a fist, a fist lingering in the air ineffectively, as though he could not decide what to do with it—or worse, that he was powerless to use it, to control or change anything around himself with it—he turned in several directions, lost, looking at objects at random, his eyes wild, the fist uncurling. All he found was a knot in his stomach, the turning of the earth coming up suddenly under his feet, nausea, helplessness.

"Raph"—Leo said, but could say no more. He wanted desperately to take it back—to take everything back, a lifetime full of transferring his anger and his powerlessness and his anxiety over the safety of his family onto his little brother, crushing him under his shadow. He had unfairly shared the weight with him, without offering a shred of thanks or acknowledgment or help, when his brother had needed it most. Better than Raphael because he'd used his shell as a bridge, because he'd been carried there by someone who had once thought of him with awe. By someone who'd trusted him. Whom he refused to trust back. Whom he refused to be equal to. It was easier to let this brother stand, through the glass darkly, and be the monster—be the other, the darkness, while he walked in the light. "Raph…"

"I wish I were *dead* ," Raphael whispered, utterly powerless, his hand at last falling by his side; he continued looking around, as though for a way out—big, tough Raphael—their rock, the fire that protected them with his silent belligerence, unwilling to be vulnerable, unwilling to move, the shadow of his brother, protector of Leonardo's right side. Donatello and Michelangelo both stood, their cynicism and amusement at the fighting gone long ago, watching their brothers with a mixture of incredulity and sickness, feeling the uncertainty, and the deadly nature of the words, slicing the air

between them. Leo stepped forward, as to help, but Raph shook his head, his eyes wandering all over but refusing to focus on him. "I think I'm gonna be sick…"

And, as by some twisted irony, Raph followed in Leo's steps and moved outside, to be violently ill in the sewers beyond the den. Leo went tentatively near the door, in case his brother needed his help; they all expected that after he pulled himself together, Raph would do as he always did: leave, for a couple hours or even a day, then return home, ready to resume life as usual; he, however, did not. He came slowly back in the door, still not looking at Leo, and went for the sink, to drink some water and spit it back out again, trying fervently to get a grip on his insides.

"Raph—you okay? Need something to settle your stomach?" Donnie asked, trying to be helpful and not reference the fight. Leo continued to watch from the den, now himself completely powerless and confused.

"Thanks, Don—gimme a minute. I should be fine… nothin' some milk couldn't cure," Raph said into the sink, splashing his face.

Donatello was breathing hard; he looked at his elder brother, a strange light in his eyes; Leo watched it, realizing that it was betrayal. Mikey had sat back down again, and a line of tears was trickling down to his neck; he had nothing lighthearted to say to bring the mood up, no string of hope to make things shine, nothing to make his brothers feel better, nothing to remind Leo that things would be okay. He realized they were waiting to hear it from Raphael, who held the fire around which they sat, protected. Without it, the shadows disappeared; but so did they.

Raph sat back down at the table, his hand slightly extended on its surface, staring at that tiny, insignificant key. One in a series of insignificant events, that when taken together were capable of changing him so much. Keys to a dark and troubled life, into which few lights had shone.

Leo at last came forward. "Raph, please listen to me… I was just afraid. I admit it, okay? I was afraid for you—I wanted to help you. I wanted to protect you, to teach you that we could really work together, if you'd just follow along, and see things my way. It was… shortsighted. I know you said you'd stay… I just couldn't stand the idea of you running off or running ahead, to get hurt, or get killed…"

He received no response; Raphael didn't so much as turn around, or flinch, or show any sign that he'd heard him.

"Raph? Can you hear me?"

Mikey shook his head, understanding. "Raph, want some milk?"

"Yes, please," Raph said quietly. "Thanks, Mikey."

Leo, who'd been standing behind, tried to get in his brother's line of vision, but failed. "Raph? Look at me. Please!"

Donnie stirred his coffee, watching as unemotionally as he could. "Not so fun being ignored, huh?"

Anger reared up slowly inside Leonardo—anger at Donnie, for this small, annoying jab—at Raph, for pretended he wasn't there—for Mikey, who pointed it out so smugly—at himself, for *everything* . His voice shook when he spoke.

"So that's it, huh? You're just gonna play the silent game and give me the cold shoulder, like a five-year-old? Really mature, Raph! Can't you just talk this out with me like an adult and stop acting like a… like a…"

They all heard it in their minds, that long-ago rhythm. *Acting like a baby* .

Leo heard himself suddenly, as though standing right next to his body, as though he were sitting in the chair with Raphael, as though he were again in the grove of *tsubaki* , watching his younger selves,

throwing out all those insignificant, horrible, damaging little words, until he had at last received them in kind—through that dark, distorted, funhouse mirror.

And Raphael, so solid, remained silent, calmly attaching the little key to the severed chain on his half of the handcuffs, and squeezing the metal together. Like the Nightwatcher motorcycle… something he couldn't afford to forget. Lizzie stood, as though deciding it was okay to approach, and came near to Raph, unexpectedly placing an arm around his big shoulders, and hugging him in her large ball of clean clothing.

Donnie remained standing, looking resolutely at his little brothers and at Lizzie, before folding his arms.

"I think you should probably go somewhere for a while, Leo—unless Raph disagrees." His voice was very firm—an older brother, in warning, taking Leo by surprise.

Raph heard him, and looked up, not making eye contact with the eldest.

"He's injured, and he's still infected an' got a fever. An' he's family. So he's not goin' anywhere. This is all between me an' him—you guys don't have t' feel betrayed or nothin' 'bout it. It's just… somethin' 'bout the two of us… messin' each other up, fer no good reason. We share th' same amount a' blame. It's not all Leo's responsibility."

A small smile crept slowly over Donatello's face at the gravity of Raphael's words. *Mercy* . He made a gesture to Leo, who remained staring at his little brother, more wretched, unhappy and weak than he had ever been, rendered so by such simple—compassionate—words. His brother refusing to be the monster.

Mikey and Donnie went along with it, acting perfectly normal around their eldest brother, as though nothing had happened, without expectation for Raph to speak to Leonardo, which he didn't. They refused to be angry, to penalize Leo or give him vindication; they

never once uttered that they yet forgave him or took so much as a fraction of the burden off his heart. When he passed Raph, in the bunks, on his way to brush his teeth, Raphael simply averted his gaze gently, abolishing his brother's existence. He and Mikey continued training the girl in shinaii, their laughter brightening the den; Donnie watched with a new confidence, protective and sure of himself, assuming the role of the eldest.

Leonardo, on the other hand, exiled to an in between realm yet tied to them by this unfinished sentence, haunted the den like a discontented ghost. He ran through the sewers, training, searching in vain. In his darkest moments he considered *seppuku* , watching the glimmer of his blades. The white camellia in his dreams told him it would be dishonorable to kill himself over such a disagreement, and that he must weather it. He ran, looking for the return path to that closeness—he and his brother, identical again, against the cold metal *youkai* , the moment Raphael turned around and bore with the weight of that crushing blow—Leonardo sometimes saw, in his dreams, beneath the demon's helmet, not his six-year-old brother's face, but his own, dealing that terrible burden.

I wish I were dead .

Ore wa shinitai da yo .

He realized he had said the same thing to Raphael, whether in dreams or in waking, but had not been understood. Across the continents of his and his brother's minds, he could not make himself understood. He could not take it back. He could not control his brother's pain. He could not save him from himself.

There were no words he could think of to bridge that gap. Their actions still seemed hopelessly tied to one another, in that marionette spider web. Yet he could never trace them back far enough to find a solution.

On the third day of this, when Lizzie was still asleep on her makeshift bed in the den, Leo came back from training all night to find his

brothers eating breakfast, Raph still smelling slightly of axle grease from working alone all night in the shop. Leo was determined; he could not be here until he'd worked himself out.

"What's up, Leo?" Mikey asked, smiling at him and eating a slice of pizza with Life cereal on it.

"I think I'm gonna stay with April and Casey for a while. The infection's gone, and the wounds are doing better. I'll be back in a week or so," Leo said, lost and somewhat quiet, staring at the tabletop.

"That's probably not wise," Donnie said, noncommittally. Raph had his back to Leo, eating his cereal meditatively, his eyes lingering on the handcuff.

For a moment, Leo felt his pride drain, felt his body become light; the words flowed before he could think, from somewhere deep within him.

"Raph—you have every right to feel betrayed, so there's no way my apologizing will fix anything. I just… I just want you to know that, no matter what stupid things I might say or do to you—you're my brother, and I love you. That's not going to change. That's… that's all." That said, he then placed a hand on his brother's shoulder for a moment, wishing he could keep it there, before—for the first time in his life—letting him go. He started to walk away.

Mikey and Donnie watched Raph's face; his eyes glittered between the healing slashes, to show he had been listening. He looked at the handcuff, listening to his older brother's steps growing close to the door; with them traveled something that could very well be lost forever. Give and take. Checks and balances. Leo's pride, and his own.

"Leo…" Raphael called, grabbing his attention. Leo turned, and Raph kicked out the chair beside him. "Don't be a martyr—you're not goin' anywhere."

Leonardo closed his eyes, trying not to shout with joy at the top of his lungs, as the tension in the room vanished, and the world suddenly righted itself. He came and sat down; Mikey and Donnie let out their breath collectively, as though they'd been holding it all along.

Leo almost spoke, but was intercepted.

"I'm sorry, Leo," Raph said, calmly.

Leonardo almost questioned him, almost told him it wasn't his fault, and entirely his own—but bit his tongue.

"I'm sorry, too," he said, and realized, powerlessly, that he'd begun to tear up.

Mikey and Donnie watched him sympathetically, with no trace of anger on their faces. Leo realized for the first time since the argument that they hadn't been showing him mercy, but love; they hadn't wanted to exile him, or alienate him—just to listen to what they'd been telling him. To trust them enough to be okay, to allow himself to be normal, to be weak, to be afraid—to be just like them. Mikey handed him some pizza.

Raph gave him a half-smile. "Well, bro, we better figure out some plan'v attack here. The Foot's after Lizzie, and Karai's gotta good hunch on where she is."

Leo took a deep breath. "Yeah, you're right. Donnie, you analyzed the samples and all that. What d'you think?"

Donnie scratched his chin; by now Raphael had told him everything that Karai had said at her headquarters. "Well, *we* know she's just a witness; *they* think she might be an experiment. That could give us the edge here."

"Hey, yeah—and Lizzie's turnin' out a real good butt-kicker. She's a quick study, dudes. That's also an advantage." Mikey pointed out,

with a mouth full of pizza. He took great pride in Lizzie's abilities with the shinaii, despite it being such a product of her amazing memory.

Lizzie came out to the table, rubbing her eyes, dressed in a t-shirt now and a pair of Mikey's over-sized Hawaiian shorts; she was looking far healthier than she had when they'd found her, and all the tangles had been worked patiently out of her hair by a steadily warming Donatello. She appeared to know by instinct (or had been listening) that Leonardo's self-imposed phantom period had passed, and the brothers had returned to a state of normalcy. She patted Leo's shell.

"Milk you want?" she asked, with her slate-faced seriousness that made Leo laugh.

"If you're heading in that direction I'd prefer some coffee. Thanks."

She smiled, in a way learned from Raph, and bounded over to the coffeepot.

"And don't let me catch you sneakin' any, kiddo," Raph warned.

She came back with coffee and a cup of milk, to sit down between Leo and Raph, providing some link to the past that tied them together again, just beyond the spider web. Leonardo looked around at them; newly five, with Master Splinter's presence hovering somewhere around them, though he was not sure from where. Perhaps in the compassion, in the link between, in the understanding, learned from standing in each other's footsteps, watching through each other's eyes.

Even with that looming threat, they sat and joked over breakfast, something like a family, without having to say it. Like they'd always been, Leo supposed. Shifting, changing, elements drifting in and out, even when incomplete. He smiled. Something like.

End

(To be continued in part three, *Walking the Line*)

Author's Note: This fic is more that thirty-thousand words long, so if you are reading this words, I thank you for reading, and you OWE me a REVIEW. Just a few words, telling me what you thought, are suitable. The third will be up on the Ninja Turtles section of the Cartoon genre, not in TMNT. I hope you'll all follow me there as I continue, and again, thank you for reading!